

POSSESSION, PROFESSIONAL SPIRIT MEDIUMS, AND THE  
RELIGIOUS FIELDS OF LATE-TWENTIETH CENTURY THAILAND

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Erick White

August 2014

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POSSESSION, PROFESSIONAL SPIRIT MEDIUMS, AND THE  
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Erick White, Ph. D.

Cornell University 2014

This dissertation substantively documents and analytically examines the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums, a relatively novel religious actor on the Thai religious landscape. Drawing on 18 months of fieldwork in Thailand, I argue that Bangkok professional spirit mediums are constituted as individuals, as a social collectivity and as a cultural category through the diverse, ambiguous and contradictory consequences arising out of their pragmatic transactions, symbolic relations and social positioning within a multitude of religious fields. Through the social and ideological labor of cultivating relations, managing boundaries and asserting distinctions of value vis-à-vis a variety of other religious and non-religious actors within a variety of Thai religious fields of action, Bangkok professional spirit mediums make distinctive claims to charismatic authority, authenticity and legitimacy which are only partially and selectively recognized or validated by Thais unfamiliar with their subculture.

This dissertation employs an approach to the dynamics of religious fields inspired by Bourdieu's practice theory in order to rethink a number of foundational analytic concepts, models and vocabularies typically utilized in the study of spirit possession in Thailand. I argue that rather than focus on "spirit cults," "Buddhism," "syncretism," and "clients and the social dynamics of therapy," greater interpretive clarity is achieved through an analysis that examines professional spirit mediumship in relation to "modalities of possession," "regimes of Buddhist

value,” “popular religiosity,” and “vocational careers and the social dynamics of entourage building.”

In addition, this dissertation argues for a deeper and richer historical and sociological contextualization of professional spirit mediums, their ideological claims and their organization of social relations than has previously been achieved in the existing scholarship. By rethinking their historical emergence and social distinctiveness against a backdrop of Buddhist modernism and establishmentarianism, capitalist industrialization, democratization and urbanization, it is revealed that many cultural, social and religious innovations displayed by professional spirit mediums are shared by other actors on the post-World War II Thai religious scene. These include strategies of religious upgrading (“Buddhaization”), organizing a religious calling as a professionalized vocation, the use of devotionism and esotericism, and embedding religious activities and hierarchies within a partially autonomous networked subculture.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Erick White was born in Allentown, Pennsylvania in 1965. He graduated from Amherst College, *summa cum laude*, in 1988 with a major in Religion. After travels in Asia and work in Washington, D.C., he began graduate work in Anthropology at Cornell University in 1990. His dissertation research took him to Thailand between 1994 and 1996. In 2002 he took an extended absence from Cornell University during which he taught for many years on the Antioch Buddhist Studies in India program. In 2012 he returned to Cornell to finish his dissertation. Erick will be a visiting assistant professor in the Asian Studies department at Cornell University during the Fall of 2014.

Dedicated to the memories of

Ronald L. White

and

A. Thomas Kirsch

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The completion of the dissertation has taken many more years than originally anticipated. As a result, it would not have been possible without the generous support and guidance of many generations of advisors, scholars, colleagues and friends. I apologize in advance to those whom I have omitted inadvertently.

I am especially indebted to my committee and all the support, encouragement, and guidance they have provided to me over the years. They never doubted or forgot me, even when I drifted away from the Anthropology Department. P. Steven Sangren, the special chair of my committee, has treated the intellectual life of academia, and my place in it, with rigor, vigor, honesty and seriousness ever since I first arrived at Cornell. I value his vision of the scholarly vocation and the respect he has shown me. Andrew Willford has always treated me as an intellectual peer, simultaneously challenged and praised my endeavours, and gently provided necessary reassurances when I was in need of them. David Holmberg's passion for ethnography and his commitment to teaching are infectious, and I hope I can embody both more fully in the future. Anne Blackburn joined my committee late in the game, but she provided timely, insightful, and careful feedback on drafts and chapters just as I was reinventing my dissertation in the closing stretch of the writing. My dissertation would not have been completed without her interventions, and so I am immensely grateful for her humane and generous spirit. A. Thomas Kirsch was the first chair of my committee and with grace and insight introduced me to the scholarship on Buddhism and Thailand. His questions and our discussions have lingered across the years, and they continue to echo inside this dissertation. I regret that he was not able to see the final shape of my responses to his inquiries. David Wyatt was another early member of my

committee who fruitfully challenged me to think critically about how as an anthropologist I could and should use historical documentation and historiography.

The research for this dissertation, carried out in Thailand between April 1994 and October 1996 and June 1998 and August 1998, was generously financed by the Fulbright Program, one year of a Jacob K. Javits Fellowship, and a Cornell Anthropology Department Endowment Grant (for 1998). I also wish to thank the Cornell Southeast Asia Program for a Summer Thesis Write-up Grant.

Numberous institutions and individuals in Thailand provided support and assistance that helped to make my research productive and bring this dissertation to eventual fruition. The Fulbright Foundation (and the Thai-US Educational Foundations) provided logistical, bureaucratic and financial support. The Thai Khadi Research Institute of Thammasat University provided an institutional home and office space. Ajan Paritta Chalernpow Koanantakool was an exemplary in-country advisor: generous with her time, astute in her observations, humane in her advice. To the many MA students of Thammasat University's Anthropology Program who took an interest in my project, I can only offer my belated thanks for all of the long, rambling discussions about anthropology, religion, theory, and Thailand we held in the various university canteens and cafes of nearby Banglamphu. Of course I wish to express my deepest thanks to the many spirit mediums, disciples, and clients I met in Bangkok and who welcomed me into their homes, activities and ceremonial extravaganzas. They endured my ignorance, questions and clueless requests with typical good cheer and kindness, and were willing to share their hopes, fears, uncertainties and regrets with a sojourner merely passing through their lives. For that I will always be grateful.



Various generations of staff in the Anthropology Department and the Southeast Asia Program provided the necessary administrative assistance and bureaucratic support which enabled me to successfully navigate and survive at Cornell University. Bonnie Blanding-May, Barbara Donnell, Margaret Rolfe and Donna Duncan were life-savers in Anthropology. Helen Swank, Teresa Palmer, Nancy Loncto, Thamora Fishel and Megan Pulver were equally instrumental in the Southeast Asia Program. Kurt Jordan as Director of Graduate Studies deserves special praise for reaching out to me and helping to make my reentry into the Anthropology Department so easy and stress free despite my long administrative absence.

Over the many, many years of my participation in the intellectual life of Cornell's Anthropology Department and Southeast Asia Program, I have benefited from the curiosity and conversations, the friendship and moral support of many different generations of peers and colleagues. Karen Richter, Ann Russ and Jan Zeserson were kind and generous friends from my incoming Anthropology cohort who remained friends across the years. Hjorleifur Jonson and Edwin Zehner were early and perceptive guides to the scholarly literature about Thailand. Various peers provided advice, comradeship and good times during the years of coursework and the initial post-fieldwork years of writing up: Michelle Bigenho, Meenakshi Chakraverti, Thamora Fishel, Sam Flaxman, Sara Friedman, John Gibson, Sondra Hausner, Dixie Henry, Smita Lahiri, Leda Martins, Michael Montesano, Lisa McGraw, John Norvell, Cabeiri Robinson, Stefan Senders, John Stevens, Nora Taylory, Allison Truitt, Benito Vergara, and Abraham Zablocki.

Some of the earliest feedback, criticisms and encouragement on my arguments about my fieldwork came via the Anthropology Department Writer's Group: Larry Barnett, Neriko Doerr, Thamora Fishel, Sara Friedman, Susan Hagen, Julie Hemmet, Smita Lahiri, Robert Philen and

Stefan Senders. Leda, Cabeiri and John N. deserve special praise for giving me a place to crash when my fortunes took an unexpected turn. During those shadowy years when I was officially away from Cornell but frequently still in Ithaca for part of the year, a number of peers helped to keep me intellectually engaged and plugged in to the local academic life: Sarah Benson, Elana Chipman, Alexandra Denes, Tyrell Haberkorn, Nina Hein, Samson Lim, Marcie Middlebrooks, Alexander Moon, Richard Ruth, and Worrasit Tantini-pankul. Once I officially returned to the administrative embrace of Cornell, Anthropology and the Southeast Asia Program, Bernardo Brown, Nidhi Mahajan, and Tina Shrestha helped me survive and find some enjoyment in the final stretch of writing. Jack Chia, Thomas Patton, and Courtney Work helped me broaden my interest in and knowledge of Southeast Asian Buddhism.

Over the long years that this dissertation has gestated, a cohort of Thai studies colleagues have reassured me repeatedly that I could finish it and that I should finish it. They are: Thamora Fishel, Tyrell Haberkorn, Peter Jackson, Patrick Jory, Tamara Loos, Michael Montesano, Justin McDaniel, Richard Ruth and Kamala Tiyavanich. I have always appreciated their faith and encouragement.

During my absence from Cornell, Robert Pryor and the Antioch Buddhist Studies Program in India provided an ideal setting to continue my exploration and study of Buddhism and Anthropology. Kerry Brown, Phelps Feeley, Danny Fisher, Giuliano Giustarini, Georgios Halkias, Dianeah Wanicek, and Wanda Weinberger ensured over the many years that life in Bodh Gaya was invigorating and compelling. My many students demanded only the best from me and helped sharpen my argumentative and pedagogical skills in ways always surprising.

I also wish to thank my family who, with only a minimum of teasing, has supported me over the long decades I was in graduate school. My father and mother, Ronald and Estheranne,

have always without hesitation believed in me, encouraged me, and remained convinced that I should finish my dissertation even when I was not convinced. I deeply regret that my father was not able to see that day come about, but I am glad I was able to set aside my work to be there for him during his months in hospice. My brothers and their families have never let me forget or give up on my dissertation. Their encouragement, cajoling and occasional material assistance is deeply appreciated. I apologize to my nieces and nephews that I was not able to write the longest dissertation in history like they all wanted. I tried.

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## NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND TRANSLATION

For transliteration of Thai words, I have followed the guidelines of the Royal Institute outlined in “Principles of Romanization for Thai Script by Transcription Method.” I have employed two exceptions to this system. For “จ” I employ “j” instead of “ch”, and for “๑๒” and “๑๓” I employ “au” instead of “o.”

All translations of Thai are my own.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Every October for eleven days a Tamil Hindu temple on Silom road – an important commercial, entertainment, finance and tourist artery in central Bangkok – hosts the annual Navarathri Festival. The structure of the festival is essentially tripartite. All activities take place at the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple in the early evening after most formal businesses have closed. The first part of the festival takes place on the first night. After concluding propitiation and worship inside the inner sanctum, a statue of Lord Ganesh, infused with the divine presence of the god, is brought out of the main shrine inside the temple and led in a procession three times around the shrine before being returned to its throne within the temple. The second part of the festival runs for ten days, from the first night through the tenth night, and consists of daily worship and propitiation ceremonies at the main shrine which are mediated by the temple priests, disciples of the gods central to the festival and members of the temple's foundation committee. The third and final part of the festival is the climax and consists of the procession of three possessed spirit mediums and three large, ornate chariots containing the statues of various Hindu gods such as Umathewi, Ganesh, and Krishna. Starting in the early evening, the procession exits the temple and winds through the adjacent streets, only returning to the temple by 2:00AM or later. Umathewi is considered the central god of the festival, and the final day of the festival is considered the birthday of Umathewi.

Although the local ethnic Indian Hindu community is the principal host and sponsor of the festival and ethnic Indian Hindus constitute the priests and mediums leading the festival's ceremonies, ethnic Indian Hindus constitute only a small percentage of the participants. This

ethnic composition of ritual participants is similar to the devotional life and ritual activities at the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple throughout the year. The vast majority of those making offerings, fulfilling devotional vows and seeking religious services at the temple are ethnic Thai Buddhists who unselfconsciously seek out the sacral potency of the temple's Hindu deities vis-à-vis the mediation of Brahmanical priests just as they do a wide range of other "non-Buddhist" supramundane entities in the local but cosmopolitan vernacular pantheon on display and accessible at other shrines or temples in Bangkok's cosmopolitan religious milieu. On the final day of the festival, thousands of Thais – possibly even ten thousand or more – travel to and congregate around the temple in order to observe or take part in the climatic procession of Hindu gods and possessed mediums. Even before police close down roads in anticipation of the crowds and procession and throngs of vendors show up to turn the streets into something akin to a temple fair, groups of Thais begin setting up temporary altars and shrines – small and large, simple and ornate, impromptu and carefully designed – along the sides of the procession route. From these spots they make religious offerings and receive auspicious blessings as the chariots and mediums pass in sequence. The roads and sidewalks become jammed with so many people that it is difficult even to walk, although crowds keep churning back and forth as they curiously check out, compliment and photograph the various altars and shrines.

One can notice within the crowds mostly dressed in white several dozen individuals dressed in extravagant, brightly colored, flashy outfits often reminiscent of the iconography of Chinese and Hindu gods or Thai royalty and aristocracy. One even sees Thai men and women dressed in Indian saris. These are professional spirit mediums, and they typically stand out not only because of their attire but also because they have large entourages of followers – sometimes up to sixty or more people – gathered around them wearing identical white uniforms sporting the

name and address of the medium's *tamnak* (abode, or divine residence) printed on the back. Moreover, the roadside altars of the mediums were inevitably larger and more extravagant than the rest, with many consisting of large statues, complicated floral and lighting arrangements, and even faux Indian temple architectural features flanking the altars. In their aesthetics and size they looked like shrines, and they often provoked from the passing crowds the devotional respect and offerings befitting a shrine.

But so too did the professional mediums themselves. Anonymous strangers could and would approach them in order to offer simple garlands and to seek blessings. These exchanges intensified after the procession had ended, at which point one could see queues of festival participants forming at the altars of professional spirit mediums to seek out blessings and advice. As the music died down, the streets began to be cleaned and the crowds thinned out, one could observe a smattering of queues scattered down the streets surrounding the temple late into the early morning. Although professional mediums, most especially mediums of Umathewi, came to the festival to pay their personal respects to devout and virtuous gods (*thep*) just like other Thais, they also clearly saw the occasion as an opportunity to buttress and circulate their own relative spiritual prowess among the larger anonymous urban population. This fact was driven home to me in 1996 when one medium from the far outskirts of Bangkok posted a large billboard behind his altar with the name, address and phone number of his abode in clear, tall letters, brightly lit up for all to see via a spotlight they had set up.

Just a few days later I visited the Garden of Dharma, the residence and spiritual center of a family of Brahman priestly experts who claim to be descended from a lineage of court Brahmins associated with the Chakri monarchy. It is located on a sleepy road in the rural eastern peri-urban outskirts of Bangkok. Today is the anniversary of King Chulalongkorn's death in



1910, and these Brahmins – regularly hired out as ritual experts for various sorts of ceremonial events in the capital and the Central region of Thailand – have organized a memorial celebration for the king that will extend late into the night. The compound is filled with an eclectic mix of self-made and purchased religious statuary – brightly painted concrete Durga and Ganesh share space with gold hued metallic Sukhothai style Buddhas and various Chinese gods and celestials. Inside a hall there is a large golden statue of Rama V (King Chulalongkorn) fronted by an empty throne and surrounded on either side by temporary altars filled with *bai sri* and other ritual offerings. Chairs and mats for guests fill the rest of the hall. Although followers and associates of the Brahmins make up part of the ceremony’s audience along with a smattering of the general public like me, a large percentage of the hall is eventually filled with professional mediums of all ages, genders and affiliation.

To the musical accompaniment of a *piphat* (classical wind and percussion) band, the family of Brahmins begins and leads a celebratory ceremony that lasts for hours and is recorded with video and photographs for posterity’s sake. In a complicated ritual choreography that ultimately confounded me, the ceremony essentially consisted of a progressive oscillation between the offering of devotional songs (accompanied by the ringing of bells, the pounding of drums and the blowing of conch shells) and the chanting of invocations seeking both to honor and invite a diverse array of divinities down to this location in order to witness and bless the event as well as the memorialized presence of Rama V. With each invitation to the gods (*choen thep*) a ripple of excitement rolls through the mediums in attendance, as different individuals become possessed or begin acting out while in a state of possession. Groaning, yelling, belching, laughing and screams ring out into the clear, dark star lit night. Bodies shake and arms flail about. Some people gyrate and spin in place or rise to dance. Hands are twisted in rapid sequence

through a variety of mudras or offered up in a supplicating wai of respect and devotion. Individuals break out into brief and sustained eruptions of glossolalic speech known as the language of the gods (*phasa thewada*). The end of the ceremony is marked by a lighting of large victory candles planted before Buddha statues as well as many smaller ones that are then passed in a long circulating arc amongst the audience. In a circumambulatory fashion, the candles travel three times around the audience and the altar at the center of the audience in an act of devotional supplication and offering. The head Brahmin closes the ceremony with a request that all of the lords (*jao*) and gods (*thep*) present use their meritorious virtue and charisma (*bun barami*) to protect and bless the present monarch of Thailand, King Bhumipol, and to protect and bless the three pillars of Thai society – the monarchy, Buddhism, and nation (*phra maha kasat, sasana phut, chat*).

As the ceremony breaks up, some guests – including mediums – approach the hosts and offer them donations concealed in pink envelopes. Other mediums wander around and greet friends and colleagues, sometimes passing along to them formal invitations to future ceremonies at the medium's own abode. Some guests and mediums leave the Garden of Dharma, but many relocate outside into a large open courtyard under the sky where they congregate on chairs and mats. Priestly members of the Brahman family relocate outside as well and start to sing songs designed to coax mediums out into the courtyard so that they can offer up wave after wave of honorific and auspicious dances which are quirkily idiosyncratic and only tangentially coordinated. By the time I depart after midnight but before the ceremony has ended, small queues of people seeking audiences (*khao fao*) with some of the mediums have formed throughout the courtyard, even as other mediums rotate in and out of dancing to much cheering and collective amusement.

On a Tuesday night in March 1996 I am at the equestrian statue of King Chulalongkorn located in downtown Bangkok in the Royal Plaza in front of the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall, which was initially a palace reception hall, then a home for parliament and is now a museum. Thais gather at the statue on the annual birth and death anniversaries of the King, but even more regularly on Tuesday and Thursday evenings (the day he was born and the day of teachers). As the “Great Beloved Monarch,” Chulalongkorn is regarded as a bodhisattva and a guardian deity of the Thai nation and its citizens. Beginning in the early 1990s a devotional movement sprang into prominence around Rama V and centered most dramatically around the equestrian statue. Thais believe that on certain days – Tuesday, Thursday and anniversaries of birth and death – the spirit of the deceased monarch descends to earth and takes up residence in the statue. Accordingly, individuals seeking to petition the royal deity for supramundane assistance congregate at the statue to make offerings and receive blessings. Many thousands of people easily show up on a typical night, arriving in the early evening and continuing to arrive until long after midnight.

An initially somewhat anarchic and spontaneous ritual practice and ceremonial organization has developed its own conventions, ritual forms and ceremonial scripts which have been reported on widely in the mass media, although the management of these events has become more regularized and regulated, first by private associations and later in a supplemental manner by state bureaucratic organizations. In the large open space directly before the statue and beyond the urns for incense and the trays for candles, individuals and groups typically set up small altars on a patchwork of mats on the asphalt ground. As the evening progresses the mats spread further and further back and off to the sides, and are only held in check by the traffic continually driving by on the outer edges of the plaza. Typically a photo, painting or statue of

Chulalongkorn has pride of place on the temporary altar, which is also adorned with a range of conventional religious offerings (flowers and garlands, fruits and sweets, incense and candles) as well as objects especially prized by the late monarch, such as roses and brandy. Worship follows the simple pattern of devotion typical at most any shrine in Thailand. Silent prayers and invocations along with occasional chanting of devotional verses occurs at the private altars, after which lit candles, incense, garlands and roses are offered up to volunteers at the base of the statue. Subsequently, the supplicants walk around to queue up at the back of the statue in order to receive, in turn, auspiciously blessed roses and garlands previously donated by other worshippers. At time the queue can stretch more than 200 people deep and individuals might have to wait for 30 minutes or more.

Some individuals and groups come and go relatively quickly, others linger for hours casually socializing, reading, meditating or absorbing the ambience. Families and groups of co-workers are common. Hundreds of vendors selling food, toys, trinkets, amulets and religious mementoes, and lottery tickets gather too, as do vendors renting out mats or selling the basic items needed for making offerings. Police circulate and beggars of various sorts find their way to the plaza as well. Scattered amongst the worshippers over the course of a night one can sometimes clearly identify professional spirit mediums. On this night I can see a few rather large and ostentatious temporary altars around which is gathered a large entourage of individuals. Unlike the loose and uncoordinated worship of most visitors, these groups often display a more sequenced and regimented devotionism guided by a clear leader. Informal enquiries clarify who is and is not a spirit medium. On other evenings I have witnessed professional mediums bring small troupes that offer up classical dance performances to honor and entertain the King. Unlike at the Navarathri festival or the Garden of Dharma's memorial ritual, however, I have

never seen mediums go into possession or receive petitioners at the Equestrian Statue. The fact that the ritual ambience is more subdued and uneven, the participating public is more heterogeneous, and the ceremonial script does not contain any obvious ritual cues that could trigger spontaneous possession seems to render such iconic behavior unlikely. Nonetheless, professional mediums take their place on this public stage along with their fellow citizens, and make sure that their followers and clients are aware of their acts of devotion even if their fellow worshippers in the Royal Plaza are unaware of their presence and devotion.

Wherever and whenever in the Bangkok metropolitan region auspicious lords (*jao*) and virtuous gods (*thep*) regularly or predictably descend from the heavens to take up an extraordinary, miraculous presence within the world of humans, whether on their own initiative or via invitations from humans, one can almost without fail expect professional spirit mediums to be on the scene. Whether those events occur in public temples or private residences, in congested streets or empty suburbs, if they are publicly accessible some professional spirit mediums almost inevitably seek them out in order to welcome, praise and perhaps become possessed by the gods. They do so in order to cultivate, demonstrate and advertise not only their own personal propriety and virtue but also to respect, honor and show devotion to that pantheon of possessing supramundane entities they have been called to serve. Accordingly, one can also find professional spirit mediums showing up at publicly accessible honoring the teacher (*wai khru*) ceremonies of esteemed esoteric masters and artists during which not only gods but the powerful founding spirits of esoteric and artistic lineages are invited into the world. Bangkok professional spirit mediums even travel beyond the metropolis to take part in wildly popular and famous public ritual occasions of this sort. Thus, in October many travel to various cities in southern

Thailand in order to take part in the ten-day Chinese vegetarian festival which prominently features self-mortification, spirit possession and processions by mediums.

Bangkok professional spirit mediums, in addition to occupying themselves with a sometimes grueling calendar of ritual services and ceremonial events at their own abodes, therefore, regularly seek to insert themselves into the wider religious culture of the city and the public ritual life of a great diversity of its religious communities and specialists. And as they do so, they rub shoulders with and define themselves as authentic and authoritative charismatic virtuosos vis-à-vis a wide spectrum of more or less distinct and differing religious beliefs, practices, collectivities and agents. To a considerable degree in fact, their personal and intimate religious identity and authority as professional mediums is defined and shaped just as much by their regular and iterative interactions, transactions and positioning vis-à-vis a range of diverse actors outside their subculture as it is by their interactions, transactions and positioning vis-à-vis participants inside their subculture. As a result, their religious identity and authority is bound up with their ability to define, manage, negotiate and manipulate those diverse sets of social and symbolic relations which characterize a range of distinct religious fields found within contemporary Thailand.

In this dissertation I seek to document, map, interpret and analyze the complex, diverse and often ambivalent relations of opposition and alliance, antagonism and solidarity, and repudiation and identification that Bangkok professional spirit mediums cultivate with a wide set of Thai actors and institutions in late twentieth century Thailand. In particular, I examine the interactions between professional spirit mediums and those actors, institutions and cultural categories located within four distinct religious fields: the field of spirit possession, the field of Buddhism, the field of popular religiosity, and the field of professional spirit mediumship. In and

through their real and imaginary relations with the social agents, institutions, and cultural categories populating each of these religious fields, professional spirit mediums not only seek to define themselves and their authority and legitimacy. In addition, they also work to cultivate a pragmatically oriented and contextually specific vision of the wider, Buddhist-inflected general religious world in which they live and act. It is this subculture specific religious world and vision of the religious fields of late twentieth century Buddhist Thailand which I also seek to document and interpret in this dissertation. This dissertation, therefore, seeks to document and analyze the ideological, social, ritual and experiential distinctiveness of the subcultural religious world produced through the interactions and transactions of professional spirit mediums with a diverse set of cultural actors, beliefs, practices and institutions.

### **Themes, Arguments and Literatures**

So who exactly are Thai professional spirit mediums and what sorts of religious roles and identities do they occupy within late twentieth century Buddhist Thailand? This has been a surprisingly difficult question to answer through reference to the scholarly literature. When I went to the field virtually no anthropological analyses of a sustained and robust nature about Thai professional spirit mediums had been pursued, either in general or in Bangkok.<sup>1</sup> Much of the work that did exist centered on Northern Thailand, and discussions of professional spirit mediums typically were limited in focus, narrow in ethnographic breadth, and analytically subordinate to larger research projects (Irvine 1982, Wijeyewardene 1986, Yagi 1988). Since then one monograph (Morris 2000) and a few dissertations (Pattana 1999, Patamajorn 2007) have focused primarily upon them. Most other analyses of them appear as either components of

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<sup>1</sup> Morris's dissertation and its discussion of professional spirit mediums (1994) appeared when I first entered the field. Whether it, and its subsequent monographic revision (2000), is a sustained and focused investigation of spirit mediums or of modernity is a matter of debate.

dissertations about other topics (Guellden 2005, Denes 2006, Tidawan 2006, Poonnatree 2012), as essays which use them as examples of larger social, cultural and religious dynamics (Muecke 1992, Morris 1994, Morris 2002, Tanabe 2002, Anan 2003, Pattana 2005a) or which focus on select and narrow questions regarding specific dimensions of the social world and religious behavior of professional mediums (Bilmes 1995, Keyes 2002, Yos 2009, Fukuura 2011, Fukuura 2012, Visisya 2012).

In part, this lack of attention to professional spirit mediums is because in terms of the scholarship on Theravada and Thai Buddhism as well as the anthropology of Buddhism (both in general and with regards to Theravada Buddhism) they are in many ways both empirically invisible and categorically and analytically confounding. Each of these conditions reinforces the other. And this invisibility and ambiguity, I argue, are a result of the ways that these scholarly literatures have conceptualized and interpreted the phenomenon of spirit possession in general. The earliest scholarship about Thai Theravada Buddhism was informed by the mutually reinforcing biases of modernizing reformist indigenous scholarship and Orientalist historical and philological Western scholarship which privileged a romantic, nostalgic, rationalist and textualist valorization of classical, canonical Buddhist literatures as the definition of authentic Buddhism (Hallisey 1995). In this scholarship spirit possession clearly was not an authentic component of Theravada Buddhism or a set of authorized or valued experiences, practices or beliefs.

As anthropologists in Southeast Asia entered scholarly debates about Buddhism in the 1960s armed with data from fieldwork, they attended to the local practices and beliefs (including possession) of ‘average’ Buddhists rather than scholastic or official experts. Nonetheless, their orienting analytic models – such as Redfield’s ideas about Great and Little traditions – continued subtly to privilege textual and canonical visions of Buddhism as the normative reference point



for making sense of local configurations of belief and practice now envisioned as “local,” “folk,” “popular,” and/or “magical” rather than as corrupt and degraded aberrations of a translocal standard (Braun 2009). In the various functionalist and structuralist models of the (local) religious field produced by these anthropologists, spirit possession inevitably was strongly counterpoised to the various ideological and praxological principles underlying “Buddhism” (whatever exactly that meant) and envisioned as lying outside of or at the ambiguously domesticated edges of Buddhism proper (for example, Kirsch 1967, Spiro 1967, Tambiah 1970).

Anthropologists of Southeast Asian and Thai Buddhism proposed various types of models to account for and interpret the (locally) patterned heterogeneous complexity of religious actors, practices, ideologies and symbolic forms they encountered on the ground and in the field. In the case of Thailand, the tripartite model of “Buddhism,” “Brahmanism” and “Animism-cum-Spirit Cults” often envisioned as a type of syncretism became – and has remained – quite popular (Kirsch 1977).<sup>2</sup> Scholarly studies of a wide variety of religious phenomenon in Thailand often employed this general categorical logic and framing when seeking to locate and interpret the distinctive religious significance, personal meaning, social dynamics, ritual logics, and cultural symbolism of a diverse range of religious phenomenon. Within these various schematic models of Thai (and South and Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhism more generally) spirit possession as a generic religious phenomenon (regardless of its cultural or historical particularity) was inevitably schematically and substantively associated solely with “animism” and/or “spirit cults” (Kirsch 1967, Spiro 1967, Tambiah 1970).

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<sup>2</sup> So popular in fact that it has been appropriated by Thai scholars and elites and, through their popular and mass market commentary, spread more widely throughout the Thai public sphere. One thus can see the tripartite scheme utilized extensively in the written and digital mass media when seeking to make sense of and represent Thai religion.

The problem, however, is that (Bangkok) professional spirit mediums not only do not easily fit within the empirical and conceptual category of “animism” or “spirit cults,”<sup>3</sup> but they also violate the whole tripartite model of heuristically segregating the Thai religious field into Buddhist, Brahmanical and animistic components, dimensions or orientations.<sup>4</sup> In fact, they reveal the inadequacy of many of the foundational scholarly presumptions, categories and strategies used to describe, interpret and analyze the actually existing diversity of religious practices, beliefs, and communities found on the ground in late twentieth century Thailand.<sup>5</sup> As a result their scholarly invisibility is perhaps not so surprising. Our limited and partial documentary evidence indicates that professional spirit mediums, whether of a “proto” or fully fledged variety, have existed at least in urban Thailand since the 1960s and have been expanding steadily within and beyond urban settings since the 1970s, the same time period when classical anthropological studies of Thai Buddhism began. No doubt the fact that the earliest anthropologists carried out research primarily in rural and upcountry regions helps to explain in part the scholarly invisibility of professional spirit mediums, although I suspect that the fact that professional mediums did not conform to the presumptions and models informing ethnographic research also played a part. When professional spirit mediums initially began to be noticed by scholars in the 1980s, the earliest scholarship typically sought to envision them within the frame

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<sup>3</sup> In the following chapters I document these confounding ambiguities, as well as the social and cultural consequences of these ambiguities in the lives of professional mediums and those associated with them. A few of the most salient confounding characteristics of Bangkok professional mediums are that fact that they are possessed by virtuous divinities from the elevated heights of the religious pantheon, that they practice mediumship as a full time vocation, that they perceive their vocation as an unabashedly and meritorious Buddhist calling, and that they inhabit a robustly collective identity as part of a generalized, supra-local and expansive subculture. None of these ideological, cultural or social features are easily accommodated within conventional models of possession within “spirit cults.”

<sup>4</sup> In the following chapters I also document how the beliefs, practices and experiences of Bangkok professional spirit mediums display features typically envisioned as belonging to “Brahmanism” – whether of a folk or court style – and “Buddhism.”

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that they are not the only religious actors who are empirically invisible and analytically confounding. A good many other contemporary religious phenomenon display the same problem.

of spirit cults, either as a variation on conventional spirit cults or as innovative extensions of and beyond spirit cults (Irvine 1982, Wijeyewardene 1986, Muecke 1992). Later scholarship has tended more often to discuss them in terms of urban religiosity/spirit cults or popular religiosity, although the lingering influence of older models of Thai Buddhism and religion can be seen in uncertainty about just how “Buddhist” the phenomenon of professional mediums are and the frequent recourse to treating them as examples of “syncretism” or “hybridity” (Yagi 1988, Pattana 1999, Morris 2000).

Substantively and interpretively, moreover, much of the scholarly work on professional spirit mediums has focused on the initial stages of becoming a medium through afflictive dissociation and its resolution via initiation into the role and identity of mediumship. In addition, much scholarship centers on the dyadic ritual relations constituted between mediums and those suffering clients who seek religious healing and thaumaturgic assistance from them. In other words, the general scholarly focus has been on professional spirit mediumship as a particular type of a cult of affliction, an interpretive fixation resulting in part, I suspect, from seeing this form of possession as an extension of “spirit cults.” These approaches, however, typically only mention in passing the wide range of other social activities, projects and agendas which I witnessed as occupying much of the daily lives of Bangkok professional spirit mediums – the cultivation of entourages and the running of abodes, the promotion of an explicitly Buddhist status and identity within and beyond their religious subculture, the instigation and management of a range of merit-making activities oriented towards encompassing Buddhist populations, and the cultivation and negotiation of satisfying relations with a diverse set of religious actors and authorities beyond their subculture. Once these concerns were interpretively addressed, it became impossible to imagine professional spirit mediums as primarily a cult of affliction set

within the general orienting frame of spirit cults. For certainly the Bangkok professional spirit mediums I encountered in the field did not perceive themselves in this way, as they made abundantly clear to me over and over.

As I seek to make sense of Bangkok professional spirit mediums in this dissertation, therefore, I start from their collective subject position looking out on the wider religious field(s) and socio-cultural terrain of late twentieth century Thailand, even as I historically and sociologically contextualize their social position and perspective. I also seek to take into consideration the full range of their social activities and labor – as well as the pragmatic ambiguities and cultural contradictions resulting from it – and the diverse set of culturally meaningful and socially salient reference points against which they define their own religious authority and legitimacy. As a result, in this dissertation I focus on the variety of social and symbolic relations – real and imaginary, ritual and discursive – that Bangkok professional spirit mediums cultivate with a variety of different actors, institutions and discourses – both outside and inside their subculture – as they pursue their religious vocation and calling. I argue that to a large degree Bangkok professional spirit mediums are constituted as individuals, as a social collectivity, and as a cultural category through the diverse, ambiguous and even contradictory consequences emerging out of this diverse web of pragmatic transactions and social positioning. The social labor involved in cultivating these transactions and the symbolic boundary work necessitated by these transactions is foundational to their ability to make claims to religious authority, authenticity and legitimacy under terms they understand and value, even if – and sometimes precisely because – other Thai actors do not culturally recognize or socially validate such claims. Part of the goal of this dissertation is to document and analyze more comprehensively – culturally, sociologically, and historically – these transactions and this

boundary work, as well as the religious claims, terms and values flowing from them, than has been previously achieved in prior scholarship.

In this effort I start my analysis from those most important points of reference, boundaries of distinction, and transactions of value as these are thematized within and through the most common activities and narratives circulating within the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums. Taking the actions and statements of mediums and their entourages as the ground for locating the most culturally meaningful, socially salient and pragmatically consequential points of reference, boundaries and transactions, the vision of their own subculture as well as the wider encompassing religious field(s) of Buddhist Thailand that emerges is necessarily idiosyncratic and likely oddly configured to those unfamiliar with their priorities and concerns. Although experiences of rapturous possession and efficacious healing have a necessary importance in their lives from their own perspective, equally important are experiences of devotional indebtedness, esoteric mastery, divine guardianship, graceful mentorship, charismatic leadership and virtuous patronage. And although fruitful social relations with senior mediums and clients seeking assistance are important, cultivating meaningful relations with assistants and disciples, junior apprentices and fellow mediums, monks and Brahmins, for example, are also typically crucially important.

In order to describe and analyze the subculture's most important points of reference, boundaries of distinction, and transactions of value, in this dissertation I rethink and rework some of the basic descriptive and analytic vocabularies that prior generations of anthropologists of Thai and Southeast Asian Buddhism have employed in their studies of local Buddhist religiosity. Starting from the perspective of Bangkok professional spirit mediums, over the course of this dissertation I describe and analyze a variety of religious fields (in an idealized and

heuristic sense) in, through and against which mediums define themselves. Thus, rather than discuss “spirit cults” I investigate the wider field of modalities of possession against which Bangkok professional spirit mediums explicitly and implicitly define themselves (Chapter 2). Likewise, rather than discuss “Buddhism” I investigate a series of specific Buddhist regimes of value against which professional spirit mediums explicitly and implicitly define themselves (Chapter 3). Rather than “syncretism” I investigate the cultural forms and social dynamics of popular religiosity against which professional spirit mediums explicitly and implicitly define themselves (Chapter 5). And finally, rather than focus exclusively on “clients” and the “social dynamics of therapy,” I investigate vocational “careers” and “the social dynamics of entourage building,” as well as the diverse range of regular subcultural actors – followers and disciples, junior mediums and competitive peers, monastic colleagues and Brahmanical associates – against which professional spirit mediums explicitly and implicitly define themselves (Chapter 6).

These various modalities of possession, Buddhist regimes of value, forms of popular religiosity and religious virtuosos, career paths and stereotypic subculture actors populate, constitute and define, I argue, the most salient fields of religious doxa, habitus, praxis, capital, distinction, and identity in and through which Bangkok professional spirit mediums, individually and collectively, ground and advance their claims to charismatic religious authority in late twentieth century Buddhist Thailand. As this language indicates, I see analytic value in reimagining the concept and dynamics of “the religious field” – long employed in the anthropology of Buddhism – along lines inspired by Bourdieu’s practice theory.<sup>6</sup> The notion of

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<sup>6</sup> Indebted as Bourdieu was, in general terms, to a classical vision of the sociology of religion, there are a number of analytic presumptions in Bourdieu’s project that I have no investment in, such as: the notion that religion is of declining importance in modernity, the assumption that religion’s principle social function is to naturalize inequality

religious field as used in most anthropological or anthropologically-inspired studies of Thai and Southeast Asian Buddhism has tended to privilege evolutionary, historicist, functional and/or structural analysis that envisions actors, practices and beliefs as rather neatly bounded and contained within categorical positions. An approach to religious fields inspired by Bourdieu has the advantage of analytically emphasizing competitive social transactions, the cultural work of distinction, the permeability and ambiguity of boundaries, and struggles over the production of dispositions and value. For Bourdieu, social fields are demarcated domains of action and arenas of struggle. They are hierarchically structured arenas defined by social struggles over symbolic capital within a pluralistic field of associated competitors. Social identities and relations are defined through the production, pursuit, consumption and accumulation of those forms of cultural capital specific to a particular field.

As a number of scholars recognize, Bourdieu's explicit writings on the sociology of religion suffer from an overly insular vision of the religious field, a parochial and typological approach to the roles available for religious actors (priest, prophet and magician), a narrow focus on exploitation and the naturalization of domination, an overemphasis on institutional and formal authority, a failure to recognize and account for pluralistic diversity within the religious field, and a privileging of the agency of certain religious actors (priests) to the neglect of others (laypeople).<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, they also recognize the value of his conceptual toolkit and his sociology of culture, capital and distinction as providing a promising and sophisticated approach to religion which takes into consideration relational structures, symbolic competition, strategic and interactional dynamics, differential sources of social value, and embedded conceptions of

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and differential power, and the belief that religion's main appeal to elites is to legitimate dominance and its pleasures although its main appeal to non-elites is to compensate for domination and its suffering.

<sup>7</sup> The most important of Bourdieu's direct writings on the sociology of religion are Bourdieu (1987) and Bourdieu (1991). With regards to general criticisms of his explicit work in the sociology of religion, see Dillon (2001), Urban (2003), Verter (2003), Rey (2007), and Turner (2011).

achievement and autonomy. His toolkit and sociology when creatively reconceptualized in application to the religious field acknowledge the many parallel hierarchies of religious value and how these vary across subcultures, expand the recognition of agency beyond monopolistic institutional authorities, recognize how religious professional coproduce religious capital in combination with their clients, and suggest that competition is structured through the complex and fluid conjuncture of multiple social-cum-religious fields.<sup>8</sup>

In all of these ways, a Bourdieu-inspired approach to the religious field(s) of Buddhist Thailand offers distinctive advantages in describing and analyzing the competitive claims to authenticity, authority and legitimacy advanced by any and all religious actors. In particular, given the stigmatized and marginalized status and position of professional spirit mediums, it provides the promise of a framework and set of orienting presumptions which recognize the asymmetric hierarchies, dissonant norms and values, contextually shifting horizons of action, and contradictory strategies of positioning that shape the local social worlds, situated perspectives and daily practices of Bangkok professional spirit mediums as they pursue their religious calling. Attentive as Bourdieu is to the fact that the social and symbolic character of the borders of fields is always at stake in and through competition in a social field, his scholarly approach highlights attention to the properties of social and symbolic boundaries (permeability, salience, durability, visibility), the mechanisms for disputing, crossing, dissolving and reinforcing boundaries, and the use of boundaries in constructing and deconstructing group membership within contested social domains (Lamont and Molnar 2002). All of these interpretive and analytic issues are important social dynamics in the production and reproduction of the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums as a stigmatized, marginal and largely non-institutionalized social

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<sup>8</sup> Those scholars arguing for the promise of Bourdieu's toolkit and his sociology of culture include: Rey (2007) and Turner (2011) on the general toolkit; Stone (2001) and Verter (2003) on religious capital in particular; and Schwartz (1996), Verter (2003) and McKinnon, Trzebiatowska and Brittain (2011) on the religious field in particular.



world of collective identity and interaction. Thus, a Bourdieu-inspired approach to social fields, social action and social power holds greater analytic promise than earlier conceptualizations of religious systems and religious fields found in the scholarly literature.

### **Field sites, Methods and Sources**

The fieldwork for this dissertation was carried out over 23 months from March 1995 to August 1996 and June 1998 to August 1998. The principal location of study was the metropolitan region of Bangkok, Thailand. This urban setting was where most of my principal informants lived, where many of the rituals and social interactions I observed occurred, and where I encountered most of my archival sources of data. Given the mobility and frequent travels of Bangkok professional spirit mediums and their entourages, however, many conversations, interviews and observations of activities and events took place outside of Bangkok as well. I travelled with mediums and their entourages to take part in ceremonial and mundane activities in the Central, Northern and Southern regions of Thailand. Given that one of my principal informants was managing a religious building project in Chumphon province in the upper South and frequently travelled there, this province constituted a secondary field site of sorts for my project as well.

The main informants for my study were professional spirit mediums and the members of their entourages. Assistants and long-time disciples were entourage members who were particularly important as informants, but general and less-committed followers provided much information as well. Clients of professional spirit mediums could at times serve as useful informants, but unless they were regular clients who consistently sought out the services of a medium the depth and breadth of my conversations with them was often limited and difficult to

contextualize. Occasionally family members and neighbors of mediums were informative interlocutors, but I did not systematically seek them out. Secondary informants who provided information about perspectives on professional spirit mediums from outside the subculture included monks, scholars, journalists and a diverse set of personal friends and associates. The degree to which these secondary informants were knowledgeable about and familiar with the subculture could vary quite a bit.

Locating potential informants relied upon a range of techniques. Local Thai-language press specializing in popular religion sometimes provided leads in the forms of advertisements by professional mediums identifying the location of their residences and abodes, profile articles about professional mediums that identified where they were located and the upcoming schedule of public ritual events, and news columns about social and ritual activities within the subculture both past and future. Armed with a detailed map of the Bangkok metropolis, I could then with some luck seek out mediums at their places of work, so to speak. Once relations of interest, comradeship or friendship had been cultivated sufficiently, mediums could at times introduce me to their peers or invite me along to collective rituals in the subculture at which I met other mediums. Similarly, clients and followers who cultivated relations with multiple mediums might suggest other abodes to visit or mediums to talk to. Once I became attuned to know what to look for regarding the architectural and decorative aesthetics of the home-based shrines, or “abodes” (*tamnak*), out of which professional spirit medium worked, I occasionally simply stumbled across mediums and their abodes while traveling around Bangkok.

Access to professional spirit mediums and their entourages was, at least in the initial stages, relatively easy to obtain. Mediums are used to, and dependent upon, a constant stream of anonymous strangers of all sorts arriving on their doorsteps seeking assistance if they are to

survive occupationally as entrepreneurial religious specialists. Thus, mediums, entourages and the subculture as a whole are quite open to unfamiliar outsiders seeking contact and access. Moreover, given that the subculture, its norms and its practices are generally speaking relatively unknown, marginal and stigmatized within Thai society, mediums and the members of their entourages are used to having to answer the questions (especially quite basic and introductory questions) of and explain themselves to strangers and outsiders. All of these general features of the subculture made initial contact and access relatively easy. In addition, professional mediums typically are interested in cultivating enduring participation and commitment by socially prestigious clients and followers, and foreigners – especially, but not only, Westerners – have a particular cultural cache within their hierarchies of prestige ranking. This dynamic often, although not always, added to my ability to initiate contact and gain access to mediums, although my foreign identity helpfully reinforced my identity as someone who was generally ignorant and thus needed explanation and instruction in even basic matters.

The abodes and entourages of Bangkok professional spirit mediums, nonetheless, are organized socially and ritually according to an implicit logic of insider/outsider. Many backstage, mundane daily and personal details of life inside abodes and entourages is occluded from observation, examination or participation to strangers, clients or casual followers. To gain access this side of life in the subculture, a greater degree of engagement and commitment is required of individuals. Genuine interest, basic subcultural competency, appropriate deference and respect, a willingness to make financial donations and donate labor to the abode, and regular participation in foundational public ritual events held at abodes – such as daily consultations with the gods, regularly scheduled ceremonial events at the abode, and special events or activities organized by the abode – generally were adequate as displays of such engagement and commitment. With time

and effort then, it was in principle possible to gain a deeper appreciation for and understanding of the daily, mundane life and backstage social life of an abode, the professional medium(s) at the center of the abode, and the ever changing entourage circulating around both.

Just how exclusive such engagement and commitment should be, however, was an ambiguous affair. Some members of entourages were more loosely and flexibly affiliated with abodes and mediums than others. In general, the longer one's affiliation with an abode and medium, the more multi-faceted one's labor and participation, and the more central that labor and participation was to the ongoing life of an abode, the more exclusive it was presumed one's commitment would be. Thus, I knew many members of entourages and followers of mediums who actively, if sporadically, took part in the activities of multiple abodes and maintained a commitment to more than one medium or abode. Assistants and disciples, especially long-term disciples, of mediums though were generally expected to commit to and affiliate exclusively with one medium and abode. Given the generally competitive, entrepreneurial occupational ethos and the valorization of esoteric knowledge within the subculture, in addition, there was a general suspicion and sanction of long-term disciples, and especially assistants, who tried to participate in, much less show commitment towards, multiple mediums and abodes.

It was a challenge therefore for me to be able to gain intimate and in-depth access to multiple abodes beyond the front stage and superficially public activities available to the casually interested and invested general public. Some of this challenge was obviated by the metropolitan, urbanized social environment of Bangkok which restricted the ability of any particular medium and his or her entourage members to be fully aware of the full range of my activities and participation in the social life of other abodes. However, given the regular participation of a churning population of mediums and their entourages in a range of sometimes quite large and

well-attended subculture wide ritual events – in particular, the honoring the teacher annual ceremonies (*phithi wai khru*) – the metropolitan environment of Bangkok was not as anonymous as one might expect. If and as I travelled to *wai khru* or other subculture events in the company of a particular medium, or as the member of a particular entourage, I would inevitably be identified by others within the subculture as a disciple, and thus more or less exclusively committed follower of, a particular medium. Moreover, I did not want to actively deceive any of my informants about my degree of commitment and exclusivity. Therefore, I struggled to live in the contradictory zone of engaged and regular participant who was not an outsider yet also not exclusively committed. This approach was only partially successful as a methodological and ethical strategy. I was able to gain intimate and in-depth access to the backstage and mundane daily life of two abodes and the mediums and entourages who constituted them. In one dramatic incident I was very publicly expelled from attendance at an abode's activities, even in a superficial sense, because I was perceived to be a spying disciple on behalf of one of the abodes whose social life I regularly participated in. This was despite the fact that – or perhaps precisely because – the expelling medium was a close colleague and friend of the medium at one of the abodes I was more intimate with.

Data for my research was collected through interviews, participant observation and archival research. Interviews with mediums and entourage members were mostly informal of an unstructured or semi-structured nature, although conversations with clients was almost always informal and unstructured. Occasionally I would have a series of pre-determined topics, issues or questions I wished to explore, but more often conversations emerged in the context of day-to-day activities in the life of the abode and were centered around gaining clarification regarding them. Although I would sometimes interrupt ongoing affairs by posing particular topics of conversation

to individuals or groups within the entourage, more often I sought to pose questions and conversational topics that emerged organically within the context of naturally occurring discussions and activities. Given my foreign status, public persona as a student and researcher, and obvious ignorance of a range of concerns in the life of abodes, I was frequently the object of explanations, clarifications and explicit pedagogical socializing – by both mediums and entourage members – designed to instruct me in the ways of the abode, the life of the subculture, the beliefs and practices of Thai Buddhism, or the culture of Thailand. I prioritized conversations and interviews with mediums and entourage members over clients given my particular analytic concern with obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of both the daily social life and dynamics of entourages and the situated perspective of professional mediums, entourages and the subculture as a whole on the contextually salient milieus, actors, and institutions of the encompassing Thai religious field.

Interviews with informants outside the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums were both informal and formal, and depending upon the context of the conversation they could be unstructured, semi-structured or structured in character. Conversations with professionals – in publishing, in media, in academia or within governmental bureaucracies – tended to be formal and structured in nature and explicitly framed as formal interviews by a foreign researcher. Conversations with other informants tended to be semi-structured at most but more often informal in nature, and these informants, associates and friends were not always fully aware of either my research project or what particular topics I was gathering data about.

I participated in and observed a wide range of activities and events. Formally bracketed ritual events identified as important within the daily life of the subculture was a prime focus of attention. These included, for example, public consultations (*khao fao*) by clients with mediums,

initiation rituals (*phithi rap khan*), devotional chanting (*suat mon*), celebrations of the birthdays of gods, the consecration of shrines and altars, Buddhist merit-making ceremonies, and most especially annual honoring the teacher (*wai khru*) ceremonies. In addition, there was a range of regular ‘events’ that were not framed as discrete or stereotypic “rituals” as such but that were informative as well: trips to religious sites by entourages sometimes glossed as ‘pilgrimages’ and private audiences by entourages with possessing gods, for example. These latter types of events blended into the various daily activities and events in the life of an abode which I observed and participate in as well when possible. These included mundane activities such as the daily offerings to gods in abodes, the planning and advance preparatory work for a variety of regular and irregular ritual activities, the provisioning, upkeep and managing of abodes, negotiations with formal outside authorities and subculture peers, and the informal education, disciplining and socialization of entourage members.

Beyond the diverse range of activities, ritual and otherwise, centered around the abodes of Bangkok professional spirit mediums, I also sought to observe and participate in a range of activities that mediums, and sometimes their entourages, take part in beyond the social life of abodes per se. These different events were generally public and open to the interested public to a greater or lesser degree. Thus, sometimes I attended these events on my own and sometimes I attended them in the accompaniment of a medium or as part of a medium’s entourage. *Wai khru* ceremonies are the most obvious publicly visible and accessible event that is defining of the subculture as a distinctive collective form of social life and religious activity. As this chapter’s opening ethnographic vignettes indicate, however, there are a range of typically ritually defined public social events within and beyond Bangkok organized by non-mediums but within which professional mediums take a particular interest. Primarily these involve occasions when virtuous

deities (*thep*) of various sorts enter into the world as not only passive witnessing presences but as interactive, intentional agencies of communication and influence. The Navarathri and Vegetarian Festivals are just such occasions, as are cults centered around sacrally potent statuary and the *wai khru* ceremonies held by various types of esoteric masters such as Brahmins, artistic virtuosos, tattooists, and others. When possible I attended these sorts of events as well. Finally, professional mediums engage in a range of ritual events outside their abodes, many of which they have helped to organize, some of which they have been commissioned to run and others of which they simply join in. The creation and blessing of home altars, the raising of territorial shrines (*jao thi* and *phra phum*), conventional merit-making at temples and shrines and religious pilgrimages are all examples of this sort of activity. Whenever possible I sought to participate in these sorts of activities too.

Interview and participant observation data was recorded primarily through written field notes. This data was supplemented to a limited degree with photography, audio recordings and a very modest amount of videotaped recordings. Mediums and entourage members typically seek to memorialize events and activities through photography, therefore my desire to do so as well was not considered disruptive and was actually encouraged. Scratch notes both obtrusively and unobtrusively recorded at the time of conversations or observation were written up in a more extended fashion outside of the field encounters as soon as possible. When engaging in formal interviews or observation at large, public events obtrusive note taking in a detailed or cursory manner was unproblematic and expected. When engaging in informal interviews and observations at smaller public – and especially private – events, note taking of even a cursory nature was more difficult and awkward, especially if I was taking part in the event as a participant or entourage member. This constraint was particularly true early on in my



engagement with a medium and his or her entourage. However, as I became more familiar to an abode and its members and as my persona as a PhD student engaging in research came more to the fore, it was often easier for me to take cursory and even extended notes on observations and conversations in a timely fashion as they were occurring.

Over time I supplemented my written note taking with selective audio taping of parts of ritual events and of informal conversations among and between mediums, entourage members, clients and outsiders. Sometimes these recordings were made obtrusively and with the full recognition of all participants, and sometimes I adventitiously and spontaneously turned on my tape recorder in an effort to capture a more comprehensive record of the language and narrative of either ritual events or conversations. Parts of some of these audio recordings were strategically transcribed. When I returned to the field in 1998 I brought a video camera which I used to make a visual record of the architectural forms and material contents of some abodes as well as to record parts of certain key ritual events. However, the use of the video camera was much more obtrusive, attention gathering and disruptive than were either note taking or audio recording, so I used it less despite its advantage in capturing a fuller record of the performative dimension of ritual activity.

In those abodes, among those entourages, and in the presence of those professional spirit mediums with whom I was most familiar and intimate, my professional compulsion to record data in as timely a fashion as possible was more easily accommodated. My propensity for scribbling down notes or recording conversations became an activity about which I was, alternatively, teased, encouraged, monitored and disciplined. I was often teased about my note taking in a casual manner that highlighted for all present my ambiguous status as an accepted participant who nonetheless remained resolutely different in my affiliation and participation. I

would sometimes be encouraged to record certain details or statements in a manner that highlighted my status as a serious student committed to either learning about Thai culture, understanding life of the subculture or intensifying my devotion to the gods, depending on the perspective of my interlocutor. Sometimes informants, either mediums or entourage members, would ask to see my scratch notes or to listen to my audio recording, often no doubt due to a general subcultural anxiety about maintaining the privacy and secrecy of the backstage life of abodes. This monitoring could produce clarification, correction, laughter or rebuke. Occasionally I would be warned not to share with others what I had observed or recorded, even as informants chuckled with reflexive amusement about the impolitic or transgressive, yet often common, behavior or statements I had recorded. A few times I was strongly rebuked about some of my recorded notes, particularly when these consisted of critical statements, claims or quotations about mediums from individuals outside the subculture. I was warned about such opinions and their errors were explained to me, even as my awkward status as a participant in an abode or the subculture was reinforced through evidence of my willingness to give even formal recognition to such perspectives. None of my informants ever read or commented upon my fully expanded and more completely recorded field notes.

While in the field I also collected a variety of archival sources about spirit possession in general and the subculture of (Bangkok) professional spirit mediums in particular. This data was gathered in order to gain exposure to a wider set of opinions, attitudes and perspectives on possession and professional spirit mediums from those outside the subculture than could be obtained simply through random interviews and observations. Through it I also sought to gain a better understanding of various types of elite opinions, attitudes and perspectives about possession and spirit mediumship circulating within the Thai mass media and culture industries.

Various sorts of archival sources also provided exposure to some of the general and stereotypic cultural discourses and frames about possession and mediumship in circulation within different spheres of the mediated public culture of Bangkok and among different segments of its population.

Consequently, I constantly was on the prowl for Thai-language journalistic reporting about possession or professional mediums in mass market newspapers, magazines, radio shows or television programs. Particularly useful in this regard were a variety of mass market low-brow weekly and monthly magazines that reported on the wide spectrum of strange, miraculous and extraordinary people and events in the domain of popular religiosity. Among stories about miraculous shrines, ghostly hauntings, virtuous monks, efficacious amulets and astrological predictions, these magazines often contained stories about professional mediums. A volatile mix of reporting, advertisement, advocacy and judgment, these numerous reports on the life and times of different professional mediums proved particularly useful in revealing more general discourses and frames about professional mediums from the perspective of sympathetic outsiders to the subculture. In addition, I collected a variety of popular press Thai-language books about spirit possession and professional mediums, or which contained observations about them in the context of broader discussions about elements of popular religion. In addition, I also sought out and collected Thai-language academic writings about spirit possession and/or professional spirit mediums in order to better understand arguments advanced by my professional colleagues that were sometimes referenced or utilized in popular mass media reporting about spirit possession.

Finally, I collected or recorded whenever possible documents and writings either self-produced or published by mediums and their abodes. These documents included flyers about and invitations to ritual events, ritual manuals or instructions aimed at visiting clients or entourage

members, and promotional materials or advertisements aimed at the general public. Sometimes mediums created and mimeographed or more expensively printed biographical accounts of their lives, the histories of their abodes, the mythologies and stories about the various *jao* and *thep* that possessed them, reports about their social activities, or commentaries on current events and affairs. Because these were designed for distribution to followers, clients and the general public, it was usually relatively easy to obtain such materials. Mediums and abodes also often made photographic and video recordings of ritual events, such as the annual *wai khru* ceremonies, held at their abode or which they took part in elsewhere. Sometimes these were made available for free or at cost to the general public, and whenever possible I sought to obtain copies of these as well.

## **Outline of Chapters**

Chapter Two documents, compares and analyzes the various types of spirit possession and spirit mediumship which are observable in twentieth century Thailand and which together constitute the religious field of contemporary Thai possession. Through a comparative lens, I explicate the defining characteristics of professional spirit mediums as a new religious role and identity in post-World War II Thailand. In particular, I describe the defining ideology, ritual practices and social organization of professional spirit mediums. I close with an analysis of how Bangkok professional spirit mediums define themselves through their actions and words in and against the other forms of possession and mediumship present in the religious field of Thai possession.

Chapter Three investigates how Bangkok professional spirit mediums define themselves in and against three contrasting frameworks for imagining, organizing and interpreting Thai

Buddhism as a structure of value, beliefs and practices. I label these frameworks as regimes of Buddhist value and identify them as inclusive syncretic, modernist reform and establishment state Buddhism. I discuss each of these regimes and how they differentially define and interpret, as well as ascribe cultural meaning and social significance, to the experience and practice of spirit possession through the analysis of a series of iconic Buddhist merit-making rituals that professional spirit mediums organized and participated in during my fieldwork. Unpacking these ethnographic moments allows me to analyze how Bangkok professional spirit mediums define themselves through their actions and words in and against the various forms of Buddhism present in the religious field of Thai Buddhism.

Chapter Four steps back from the contemporary moment to examine the historically diverse set of economic, political, social and religious developments in post-World War II Thailand which in combination facilitated the emergence of professional spirit mediums as a new and authoritative type of religious agent. After examining the religious consequences of capitalist development, democratization and urbanization, I explore the decline and fragmentation of establishment Buddhism and the subsequent efflorescence of Thai popular religiosity. I analyze how these developments have led to the proliferation of authoritative charismatic religious authority across the religious landscape of late-twentieth century Thailand in such a manner as to grant newfound appeal and legitimacy to professional spirit mediums, amongst a wide diversity of unconventional religious actors and movements. In addition, I also provide, to the degree currently possible, a discussion of the historical emergence and expansion of professional spirit mediums as religious actors in the context of these broader and more general historical transformations.

Chapter Five examines scholarly efforts to characterize popular Thai Buddhist religiosity at the end of the twentieth century and to identify professional spirit mediums as particularly iconic examples of this religiosity. In contrast to other interpretations, I argue that the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums constitutes an emergent form of religiosity that illuminates contemporary trends through its similarities with and differences from defining characteristic of the field of late twentieth century Thai popular religiosity. To this end, I explore in depth a diverse set of defining social and cultural characteristics of the subculture not previously explicated in the existing academic literature. After examining how Bangkok professional spirit mediums serve as catalysts in the creation of new forms of popular religiosity, I close the chapter with an explication of how their beliefs and practices conform to a more general strategy of religious upgrading and “Buddhaization” pursued by a diverse set of innovative religious actors in late twentieth century Thailand.

Chapter Six documents and interprets the normative career path of mediums within the Bangkok subculture of professional spirit mediums. Through an analysis of its sequential segments, stereotypic biographical elaboration, structural conjunctures and developmental dynamics, I unpack how the identity and charismatic authority of professional spirit mediums is socially produced through word and deed. Central to my analysis is an accounting of how the individual charismatic authenticity, authority and legitimacy of a professional spirit medium is dependent upon cultivating particular sorts of social relations with a diverse set of other actors within the social field of the subculture. I show that in the end both the moral meaning of mediumship and progress along the career path are intersubjective accomplishments dependent upon the collaborative creation of the multi-faceted charismatic authority of mediums.

Chapter Seven summarizes the findings of the dissertation and reflect on two incipient ideological possibilities within the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums which point to the cultural limits and social dissolution of the religious authority at the heart of the subculture. I argue that these are suggestive of how the subculture, from a different perspective, could be interpreted as just one particular articulation and configuration of a potentially even more encompassing and general social field of religious experience, belief, practice and sociality in late twentieth century Thailand.

**CHAPTER TWO**

**MODALITIES OF SPIRIT POSSESSION IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY THAILAND:  
THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DISTINCTIVENESS OF  
PROFESSIONAL SPIRIT MEDIUMS**

Observing and interviewing professional spirit mediums, and their followers and clients, in the Bangkok metropolis, one is rarely cognizant of the fact that historically within twentieth-century Thailand there have existed numerous cultural forms of spirit possession and social traditions of spirit mediumship. Contemporary professional spirit mediums themselves, and no doubt especially those in Bangkok, are often unaware of, or simply do not comment very frequently upon, other forms of spirit possession or spirit mediumship which also have flourished either in earlier historical eras, within rural agricultural communities, among minority ethnic communities, or within particular local geographic regions.

This silence is perhaps not so surprising, however, because professional spirit mediums primarily interact and associate with only other professional spirit mediums. It is after all most typically a senior and established professional spirit medium who initially introduced them to the subculture of mediumship by publicly identifying them as possessed by a *jao* or *thep* during a therapeutic encounter. In addition, it is a senior and established professional spirit medium who officially recognizes their new status as a devoted servant of the gods during the initiatory *rap khan* (“receiving the tray”) ceremony. And it is a senior and established professional spirit medium who confirms their status as a subordinate apprentice within a lineage of mediums through the *khraup khru* (“to cover or transmit the teacher”) ceremony. In addition, other professional spirit mediums are the principal set of peers with whom they interact on a semi-



regular basis – as partners, supporters, assistants and officiants in various religious ceremonies within the subculture or beyond it, as competitors and critics vis-à-vis the allegiance of followers and clients, or as guests and associates whose attendance, recognition and participation is crucial during every medium's annual *phithi wai khru* ("paying respects to the teacher") ceremony. Finally, when professional spirit mediums read about Thai spirit possession and spirit mediums in the mass market popular print media or watch national television shows, documentaries and news that discuss Thai spirit possession and spirit mediums, they almost exclusively end up reading about or watching accounts of professional spirit mediums like themselves. Professional spirit mediumship is that form of spirit possession and spirit mediumship which the Thai national mass media tends primarily to focus on in its reporting.<sup>9</sup>

In many ways, professional spirit possession and professional spirit mediums currently occupy a position of sociocultural dominance in relation to those other forms and traditions of Thai spirit possession and spirit mediumship which have existed in twentieth-century Thailand. The social and ideological prominence of professional spirit mediums and spirit mediumship within both the Thai national mass media, and Thai popular culture more generally, moreover, is matched in turn by their ostensible demographic dominance when compared to other forms of spirit possession and traditions of spirit mediumship which are, by contrast, often perceived by

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<sup>9</sup> The one exception to this general observation is the tradition of spirit possession and spirit mediumship within Chinese popular religion. This form of possession and mediumship receives a regular smattering of attention in the Thai national media, which especially since the 1980s is concerned with documenting Thailand's cultural diversity. In particular, this Chinese tradition of spirit possession and spirit mediumship receives an enormous amount of attention every year at the time of the Chinese Vegetarian Festival. Much of this intense media coverage is a product of the way in which the Vegetarian Festival in Phuket, and especially the dramatic feats of self-mortification by Chinese spirit mediums who participate in this festival, has been appropriated and disseminated as part of a commercialized promotional agenda designed to increase domestic and international tourism to Phuket (E. Cohen 2001). It is not clear, however, to what degree most professional spirit mediums actually perceive spirit possession and spirit mediums in the tradition of popular Chinese religion as historically, symbolically or culturally distinct from their own beliefs and practices. Instead, given the general polytropic character of Thai popular religiosity and the current, relatively broad-based Thai celebration of Chinese culture, many professional spirit mediums claim to be possessed by Chinese gods. They also sometimes employ Chinese ritual paraphernalia and perform Chinese, or at least Chinese-influenced, rituals on behalf of their followers and clients.

most commentators as declining in social prominence, in religious salience, and in the number of practitioners.

Nonetheless, within Thailand's long and heterogeneous heritage of popular religiosity there has existed a plurality of discrete forms of possession and traditions of mediumship. Moreover, professional spirit possession and spirit mediums are actually a relatively recent historical phenomenon, only having appeared on the Thai religious landscape in significantly noticeable numbers since after World War II. Likewise, their social and cultural prominence within the field of popular religiosity has emerged only in the wake of a number of broad-based but sweeping economic, social and cultural transformations I discuss later which, in combination, have transformed fundamentally both Thai religiosity and Thai society more generally. In this way, therefore, professional spirit possession and spirit mediums are contemporary both in the sense of being current and of being recent.

Consequently, we can better appreciate the contemporary cultural meaning and social significance of professional spirit mediums and spirit possession by contextualizing them both socially and historically in relation to those other Thai forms of spirit possession and traditions of spirit mediumship which historically preceded them. Unfortunately, no historiographic scholarship has examined closely the specific social interactions and historical linkages between these prior forms of Thai spirit possession and spirit mediumship and the emergence, expansion and consolidation of both professional spirit possession, as a distinct ideology and form of devotional religious experience and practice, and of professional spirit mediums, as a distinct type of expert religious practitioner and purveyor of sacral assistance. As a result it is not fully clear how the earliest professional spirit mediums emerged historically out of, or in relation to, these prior traditions of experience, belief and practice. Neither is it fully clear how historically

professional spirit mediums have simultaneously both identified themselves with and distinguished themselves from these other multiple forms of possession experience and styles of mediumship as they have sought creatively to assert and stake claim to a new and innovative type of religious experience, cultural authority and social identity within the larger field of mainstream Thai popular religiosity. Nonetheless, a brief examination of these prior forms of spirit possession and traditions of spirit mediumship within Thailand will allow us to identify more clearly what exactly is historically, culturally and socially distinctive – within the context of Thai religiosity – about professional Thai spirit possession and spirit mediumship as a symbolic claim and a ritual practice, as a charismatic social role and a source of religious authority.

In this chapter I first provide a brief descriptive survey of those various forms of spirit possession and traditions of spirit mediumship which have historically preceded professional spirit mediumship in Thailand. I then proceed to examine professional spirit mediumship in a comparative light, seeking to highlight those social and cultural features which reveal its historically unique character. Thus, after first explaining why I choose the label “professional” to identify this form of possession and mediumship, I then investigate those defining elements of ideology, ritual practice and social organization which distinguish professional spirit possession and mediumship from those other forms of either possession or mediumship also found in twentieth-century Thailand. I conclude with some reflections on how Bangkok professional spirit mediums socially and symbolically locate themselves in relation to other modalities of possession and other sources of charismatic religious authority within the contemporary religious landscape of Thailand.

## **A Plurality of “Traditional” Forms of Spirit Possession and Spirit Mediumship in Thailand**

Given the inherent difficulty in definitively classifying the various recorded cases of a complex and multifaceted sociocultural phenomenon such as trance, possession and mediumship, the following substantive and analytic categories are empirically tentative and do not presume to be either exhaustive or final.<sup>10</sup> The primary purpose of this classificatory scheme, instead, is heuristic and the following descriptions are designed primarily to highlight analytically, in a comparative manner, the historically unique social and cultural characteristics of professional spirit possession and spirit mediumship within the wider field of Thai modalities of possession. Thus, I do not intend the brief descriptions I provide of various types of non-professional spirit possession and mediumship to be considered either ethnographically or analytically complete; each type of possession and tradition of mediumship is deserving, in its own right, of more robust examination, description and analysis in order to understand its own specific social and cultural dynamics and its own particular relation to the changing wider field of Thai religiosity, both in the past and in the present. I have relied primarily upon the English-language ethnographic literature for the cases and data which inform this effort to distinguish analytically among what I argue are, more or less, historically discrete sociocultural forms of trance, possession and, in some cases, mediumship. I begin by discussing forms of possession that do not involve the attribution of a discrete, specialized, recurring social role, i.e., the spirit medium, to the individual who experiences possession. I then proceed to discuss forms of possession in

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<sup>10</sup> The Thai historical and ethnographic literature, for instance, includes brief references to certain types of spirit possession – such as possession by nature spirits or the spirits of non-human sentient beings such as natural and mythic animals – which I have not included in this classificatory overview. I have excluded them primarily because the limited and sporadic discussions of them in the literature make it difficult to reconstruct even speculatively any of these forms of possession as a coherent complex of experiences, ideologies, practices, and social relations.

which an individual is invested with the social role and identity of a spirit medium and is publicly identified as susceptible to regular possession by a supramundane entity.<sup>11</sup>

*Possession as playful entertainment.* Several scholars (Anuman 1958a: 2-3; Kaufman 1977 [1960]: 169; Attagara 1967: 31-36; Textor 1973: 473-484; Kraist 1984) have described a form of collective entertainment involving trance and possession which once occurred regularly during the annual Thai New Year festival of Songkran but which was less common already by the 1960s.<sup>12</sup> Essentially, groups of young peers, men and women, would gather together in the evening during the Songkran festival in order to induce possession in one or several members of the group. A variety of spirits might be called, but typically only male spirits possessed men and only female spirits possessed women.

The most prominent spirit called down was Mae Sri (Mother Prosperity). In this case, a group of young villager women would gather in a circle with one woman, who was considered the most emotional, chosen to sit in the center of the circle on an upturned paddy mortar. Incense was lit and either held by the single female in a propitiatory *wai* or placed in the ground nearby. The rest of the women would then sing various folk songs over and over like a repetitive chant, perhaps accompanied by drumming, in order to entice Mae Sri to possess (*khao phi song phi*) the solitary woman. Trembling and swaying back and forth indicated possession was occurring, and

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<sup>11</sup> In this distinction between spirit possession and spirit mediumship, I follow the lead of Firth's classic distinction between spirit possession as "a form of trance in which the behavioral actions of a person are interpreted as evidence of a control of his behavior by a spirit normally external to him," while "spirit mediumship is normally a form of possession in which a person is conceived as serving as an intermediary between spirits and men" (1969:14). For Firth, spirit mediumship implies communication. I would place a greater emphasis on the idea of spirit mediumship as implying a clearly ascribed and recurring role as an intermediary as well as an identification with the possessing spirit. As the following Thai forms of possession will show, possession involving communication and mediation does not always indicate the attribution of mediumship as an enduring social role and identity.

<sup>12</sup> All of the reported incidents are from the central region of Thailand. It is not clear, therefore, exactly how geographically widespread this cultural form of possession is or was. Adolf Bastian provides a brief description of what appears to be a very similar form of possession as entertainment and "diversion" which he observed, or was told about, in the mid-nineteenth century. Bastian, however, does not indicate where in Siam the possession event he is describing occurred. See Bastian's translated account in Oesterreich (1966: 353).

when it was complete the woman would rise up, dance and continue to dance as long as the singing persisted. Most authors suggest that the possessed woman did not speak during the dancing, but Textor indicates that ribald questions and answers between Mae Sri and the audience were common. Also, sometimes the members of the audience would seek to determine if the maiden was full possessed and was not fully conscious, frequently by thrusting or prodding the woman in the center of the circle with a lit incense stick. The woman possessed by Mae Sri would dance until the singing stopped, at which point she should regain consciousness, although if that did not occur she might be tickled or lightly slapped to break the trance. This process could be repeated with numerous women until the participants chose on their own to stop the entertainment.

Kaufman and Textor report that sometimes the same procedure was performed with men, in which case Linglom (“the wind monkey”) was enticed to possess a single man and cause him to behave like a monkey. The audience would tease the possessed man and try to provoke his anger, and he might, in turn, threaten and even bite members of the group, until the audience had had enough at which point they would slap the possessed man to awaken him from his trance. Other spirits – associated with items such as the fish trap, the coconut half-shell, and the winnowing basket – could also be called down during the festival, inducing those who they possessed to dance and mimic behavior associated with that object.

None of the scholars note any religious significance whatsoever attributed to this form of possession, and the experience is not seen as either particularly benevolent or malevolent in character. Blessings are not asked for, supramundane intervention is not requested, and no proof of even mild special powers, such as foresight regarding future lottery numbers, is requested of the individual who is possessed. Likewise, no personal suffering, afflictions or somatic

disturbances result from the experience of possession. Moreover, there is at best only very limited communication of any kind sought with or provided by the possessing spirit, conforming with the general impression that there is no greater social purpose to this experience of possession other than simply entertainment and pleasure, presumably for both the audience and the person possessed. Although a regular annual phenomenon, no single individual regularly becomes possessed by Mae Sri or Linglom and there are no restrictions presumably on who could become possessed. Consequently, the experience of possession has no abiding significance for the public social identity of anyone who is possessed. Furthermore, there are no forms of unusual esoteric knowledge, specialized ritual techniques or uncommon ritual objects associated with this form of possession. Despite all of these experiential, symbolic and social differences from all other forms of Thai spirit possession, this form of spirit possession as playful entertainment does conform to a common Thai belief that true possession involves a total loss of consciousness. It also seems to conform to the pervasive Thai belief that women, due their more emotional nature and the fact that they are *jai aun* (“weak-hearted”), are more prone to possession than men.

*Malevolent possession requiring exorcism.* Possession by malevolent or capricious spirits (*phi*), which intentionally or unintentionally cause illnesses and diffuse somatic disturbances of various kinds within their hosts and which consequently require exorcism, is widely reported in the ethnographic literature (Anuman 1958b; Attagara 1967: 26-30; Tambiah 1970: 312-336; Piker 1973: 313; Textor 1973: 286-292, 447-468; Sangun 1976; Sangun 1978; Golomb 1985: 112-120, 136-139, 230-250; Sangun 1986; Anuman 1986: 110-114). The most famous example of this kind of capricious and malevolent spirit is the *phi paup*, but there are other types of

possessing *phi* such as *phi ka*, *phi tai hong*, and *phi tai thang klom*.<sup>13</sup> These *phi* may possess individuals due to their own self-interest and malice or because they have been disturbed and mistreated by particular humans in some way. They may also possess someone because they have been sent to do so by a sorcerer (*mau phi*) who nurtures and controls them. Possession by malevolent spirits, therefore, can shade imperceptibly at times into the diverse but related unsystematic complex of heterogeneous local Thai beliefs concerning sorcery and witchcraft.

Possession by malevolent *phi* constitutes in many senses a special sub-category of the more general phenomenon within Thai religiosity of attack by a malevolent spirit. Spirit attacks in general produce chronic, and sometimes life-threatening, somatic afflictions of various kinds,<sup>14</sup> but spirit possession by malevolent *phi*, in addition, also involves the eventual display of symptomatic behavior which is dissociative, anti-social and even violent in character. As a result, the accurate diagnosis that a patient's current problems result from possession by a spirit rather than just an attack by a spirit can often require a considerable amount of time and effort in any given case.<sup>15</sup> The main strategy for resolving a spirit attack, once preventative strategies of

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<sup>13</sup> The source of a *phi paup* and a *phi ka* is not clearly specified, but a *phi tai hong* is the ghostly spirit of someone who has died a violent death, while a *phi tai thang klom* is the spirit of a pregnant woman who has died during childbirth (Anuman 1986: 112). Formoso (1998: 8-13) provides a comprehensive overview of the numerous types of malevolent spirits found among Tai groups, not just those which attack humans by possessing their bodies. Formoso interprets all malevolent spirits as sharing a set of general characteristics which highlight their basic uncontrollable and unsocialized wildness – they live in forests and uninhabited areas, they are mostly active at night, they feed on human wastes or foods that humans refuse, and they frequently arise through bad deaths which cannot be socially reappropriated via rituals of purification. In all of these ways, Formoso interprets malevolent spirits as standing in categorical opposition to another category of supramundane entities, protective guardian spirits (*phi raksa*), which I discuss in more detail below in terms of possession by a communal tutelary or guardian spirit.

<sup>14</sup> Mills (1995) provides an extended ethnographic description and analysis of a case in which many men suffered from, or feared, attacks by marauding “widow ghosts” (*phi mae mai*) in Northeastern Thailand in the early 1990s. She explores how these attacks thematized male distress at women's increased economic and social independence within households as well as a general fear among Northeasterners that they were vulnerable to deprivation in their relations with the rest of Thai society.

<sup>15</sup> Possession by a malevolent spirit can result in many generalized symptoms not specifically associated with possession per se, such as headaches, stomach aches, weakness, dizziness, vomiting, and an excessive or unusual appetite. In addition, however, eventually a series of more dramatic symptoms (characterized as hysterical in Western etic terminology) manifest themselves, such as shaking, spasms, screaming, shouting, weeping, incoherent speech, thrashing about and uncontrolled bodily movement. A diagnosis of spirit possession is only definitive, however, once an exorcist manages to get the spirit to speak and, more importantly, identify itself. A full analysis of



protection have failed, is placation: first one invites the spirit to stop attacking, and if that does not work one subsequently bribes the spirit to leave one alone by employing various types of particular offerings that are especially appealing to the particular type of *phi* with which one is dealing. Spirit attacks that take the form of possession, however, are unusual in that placation is an inadequate form of resolution. They require instead exorcism.

An exorcist can be a Buddhist monk, a spirit doctor,<sup>16</sup> or even a spirit medium; what is crucial is that the exorcist is able to access, control and deploy a superior supramundane power – either the morally virtuous authority of the Buddhist dharma, Brahmanical esoteric knowledge, or the morally ambiguous potency of a powerful spirit familiar or deity – that can force the malevolent spirit out of the afflicted person's body. Instead of placation as in a general spirit attack, the logic of resolution in malevolent spirit possession involves coercion and trickery. The exorcist first must compel the spirit to begin to coherently communicate and subsequently identify itself. Then he must force it to leave the afflicted victim, a process that can occur quickly or take several weeks. Medical herbs and the recitation of potent incantations (*khatha*) can form part of the strategy for forcing an inevitably reluctant spirit to first identify itself and

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the complex social process of diagnosing and treating malevolent spirit possession within the pluralistic framework of Thai medical etiologies and therapeutic interventions is beyond the scope of this description. But see Tambiah (1970), Golomb (1985) and Sangun (1986) for more details in this regard. Whittaker (2000: 44-68) provides an illuminating description and analysis of modern Thai therapeutic pluralism, contesting forms of knowledge about somatic health, and the variety of social actors who provide therapeutic assistance within one Northeastern Thai village. Textor (1973: 283-292) provides a detailed discussion of the range of common techniques of diagnosis and exorcism used in the Central Thai village of Bang Chan in the 1950s.

<sup>16</sup> Spirit doctors are typically characterized in the ethnographic literature as individuals who, at a minimum, possess potent esoteric knowledge and sacralized regalia capable of coercively exerting control over malevolent *phi*. Frequently, spirit doctors also retain the assistance of supramundane entities more powerful and/or virtuous than *phi* to assist them in performing an exorcism, either because the spirit doctors possess control over these entities who are their familiars or because the spirit doctors are capable of being possessed by these potent supramundane entities (in which case the supramundane entities are likely to be perceived as in some sense at least marginally virtuous rather than simply just powerfully, if morally ambiguously, potent). In the ethnographic literature, the Thai term for spirit doctors is usually *mau phi*, but there are also a great number of different and unique regional or local names for a spirit doctor who specializes in exorcisms, i.e. Tambiah's *mau tham* (Tambiah 1970). To add to the classificatory and terminological confusion, individuals identified as *mau phi* do not always conform very well to even this general model of the spirit doctor that I have outlined above. For instance, Kirsch's *mau phi* do not seem to resolve afflictions resulting from possessive spirit attacks through recourse to coercive exorcism, but rather employ placation and contractual offerings (Kirsch 1967: 377-378, 395-398).

subsequently leave. Typically, however, threats of force as well as actual violence – such as beating the possessed individual with rattan sticks or magical regalia – are also used to drive out the spirit since the spirit almost inevitably will seek to hide in different parts of the afflicted person's body before consenting eventually to leave by exiting the victim's feet. After a possessing spirit has been exorcised, frequently the formerly afflicted victim is subjected to a variety of protective and strengthening rituals, such as the *su khwan* ceremony. These are designed either to reaggregate the formerly afflicted individual's previously dispersed and fragmented psychic integrity (thematized as *jai* or *sati*) or vital elements (*khwan*) or to solidify, harden and strengthen the boundaries of the individual's psychic and volitional integrity in order to prevent future susceptibility to a disruptive penetration by any malicious external force or entity.<sup>17</sup>

What is most defining of malevolent possession by a *phi*, of course, is that it produces suffering and afflictions. Moreover, this suffering and these afflictions cannot be transformed in any way into an even ambiguously valuable experience via the domestication of the possessing spirit and the attribution and acceptance by the afflicted individual of a new social role as a spirit medium. This dynamic is largely due to the fact that the possessing spirit is inherently and unalterably defined, within the Thai cosmological system, as solely malevolent in character. Instead, the proper response to this form of possession is a permanent rupture in the relationship between the possessing spirit and the afflicted individual, a rupture that occurs via exorcism. So although communication with the possessing spirit is desired, it is desired only in order to be able eventually to terminate any further communication or interaction.

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<sup>17</sup> Adolf Bastian provides an account of a nineteenth-century Siamese exorcism of a malevolent spirit – a *phi pisat* – by a *mau*. He describes a broadly similar process involving the use of potent charms and sacred thread to coerce and bind the possessing spirit, the need to get the spirit to communicate and name itself before it will depart, and the use of physical force and violence to compel the spirit to finally release the possessed victim. See Bastian's translated account in Oesterreich (1966: 217-218).

Consequently, malevolent possession does produce a change in the social role and identity of the person possessed, but this change is (ideally) temporary, is solely negatively valued, and has no general collective meaning or significance beyond a small assembly of household, kin and non-kin relations affiliated with the afflicted individual. The pervasively negative evaluation of malevolent possession is reflected by the fact that typically no one requests any form of assistance or even a lottery number from an individual possessed by a malevolent *phi*. Neither does the experience of malevolent possession produce any increase in an individual's esoteric knowledge, supramundane efficacy or general social status and public moral authority. Just as importantly, the experience of malevolent possession is not consciously desired or sought out by the person who experiences possession. Nor does that individual have any control over the initiation of possession or the ending of it – all of which is dependent instead upon the agency, power and intervention of other human or supramundane actors. In addition, the experience of malevolent possession is not socially organized as part of any larger, regularly scheduled collective ritual of a communal nature. Instead, malevolent possession, although it may occur regularly, is ideally an occasional or even just a one-time affair, it emerges temporally in response to the particular tempo of an individual life history, and its occurrence or treatment is not linked to any culturally valued collective rituals of a communal nature. Finally, malevolent possession does display certain almost universal features of possession within Thai culture: it is described and experienced as typically involving complete dissociation, and it is commonly perceived and observed to occur more frequently among women than men.

*Possession by an empowered teacher.* In Thai culture there are experts (*mau*) in various kinds of esoteric knowledge (*wicha*) who are believed to have been originally discovered by or revealed to an ancient and mythic ascetic teacher (*ruesi*) and subsequently passed down through

a continuous lineage of empowered teachers (*khru*). The authenticity and effectiveness of this esoteric knowledge is crucial to the successful utilization and performance of his craft by any expert, regardless of whether this craft is artistic, therapeutic, thaumaturgic or religious in character.<sup>18</sup> The authenticity and effectiveness of this embodied form of esoteric knowledge, however, is dependent upon not only an unbroken chain of transmission extending back to the original *ruesi*, but also upon the immediate, contemporary and recurring mediation and transmission of this knowledge through an empowering submission by the disciple to the moral authority and sacral potency of his current teacher and, by extension, that teacher's whole preceding lineage of empowered teachers. This immediate and empowering mediation by the teacher and the teacher's lineage which legitimates the disciple as a proper and true expert occurs within the annual *phithi wai khru* (paying respect to the teacher ceremony), and, as several Thai scholars have noted (Irvine 1982, Grow 1992, Johnson 1999, Wong 2001, Grow 2002) during this ceremony the teacher who empowers his disciple is possessed by the spirit of the original *ruesi* and the collective spirit of all other teachers within the lineage. It is through an experience of possession, then, that unbroken continuity and perfect transmission is ensured by recreating and reproducing on a regular annual basis that original transcendent moment emblematic of the original revelation, transmission, and acquisition of esoteric knowledge.<sup>19</sup>

Although the regular experience and practice of possession by the senior teacher (*khru*) is necessarily foundational for the legitimacy, authority, authenticity and ultimately efficacy of all

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<sup>18</sup> These analytic distinctions between forms of knowledge and types of craft-like expertise, of course, have not traditionally been recognized as absolute or even necessarily that relevant within Thai culture prior to the introduction of Western Enlightenment paradigms for the discovery, organization and transmission of true and efficacious knowledge.

<sup>19</sup> A historically and culturally distinct tradition of possession by an empowered teacher that has received considerable attention in the academic literature is *manora* or *nora*. This is a tradition of dance performance found in southern Thailand in which the master of ceremonies is also a communal elder, healer and during *wai khru* ceremonies a possessed medium. See, for example, Guelden (2005a), (Guelden 2005b), Parichat (2006), Horstmann (2009), Horstmann (2011), Horstmann (2012), Cholthira (2013).

actions by any subordinate *mau* within a particular lineage of instruction, it is important to realize that the everyday authority, efficacy and legitimacy of any *mau* is not dependent upon any ability to experience possession of any kind, either during the *phithi wai khru* or at any other time of the year. In fact, only the senior teacher ever experiences possession as such. His students typically do not become possessed during the *phithi wai khru* because artistic practitioners usually believe that students are not adept enough to safely experience the immediate and charged potent presence of the *ruesi* and collective lineage of past teachers. Thus in this sense, a *mau* does not have to experience possession or performatively display its presence or consequences in order to become, or be socially recognized as, an authentically empowered and efficacious expert. That power and efficaciousness is ensured instead by his personal adeptness in learning an embodied form of knowledge and practice, his moral subordination to the particular ethical code and prohibitions accompanying his esoteric knowledge, the relative potency of the incantations and techniques he has mastered, and his continued access to and acceptance of the reiterated authoritative moment of foundational empowerment mediated through the body of his *khru* during the annual *phithi wai khru* ceremony. Consequently, although the experience of possession is ideologically crucial to the legitimacy and authority of any *mau*, it is simultaneously also a distant and peripheral phenomenon as both a personal experience and a social practice from the perspective of almost all *mau* and those clients who seek them out.

Neither an entertaining performance of playful revelry nor a public drama of personal somatic affliction and dissociation, the experience of possession by a senior teacher is characterized instead by a subdued and restrained, almost august, public presence. In addition, during that moment of social recognition when a teacher's ritual mask is placed by the *khru* on

the head of his disciples, only general auspiciousness and blessings accompany the transmission of esoteric knowledge and the public crystallization of the teacher-student relationship. In this atmosphere of extreme deference and subordination, there is no testing of the authenticity of possession by the audience, no confrontational challenge by a student designed to provoke the possessing *ruesi* into self-authenticating communication. Moreover, there is no sense in which any kind of afflictions or somatic disturbances accompany the experience of possession by a *ruesi*.

The ability to become possessed by a *ruesi* marks a significant change in the social role and identity of the teacher who is possessed, but this transformation into a senior teacher, although permanent, is primarily a deepening of an already existing role as a teacher, and hence there is no sense in which the teacher is now identified anew or instead as a spirit medium, even within the limited context of the *phithi wai khru* ceremony. This change is also unambiguously positively valued, although its full cultural meaning and social significance primarily only extends as far as the social boundaries of any teacher's personal network of students and disciples. The *ruesi*, after all, is perceived primarily as a benevolent and empowering supramundane moral agent, although everyone also recognizes that he and the total lineage of empowered teachers can punish those students who misuse their esoteric knowledge, disrespect their teacher or violate their lineage's ethical code. By the same token, this power of blessing and punishment only extends as far as those individuals who have consciously placed themselves in a relation of subordination to the senior teacher and thus by extension the *ruesi* and extended lineage of previous teachers.

In contrast to possession by a malevolent spirit, a senior teacher's possession by his *ruesi* and prior lineage of teachers is consciously desired and actively cultivated from the very first

time it occurs. Nonetheless, the empowered senior teacher can exert only limited control over when possession begins or ends. Possession must occur regularly during the annual *phithi wai khru* ceremony but otherwise it does not occur on a regular basis at any other time of the year. Yet at the same time, possession cannot occur unless the senior teacher consciously engages in proper propitiation designed to induce it by inviting the empowered teachers to possess him. In contrast to expected Thai conventions regarding possession, however, senior teachers who are possessed by *ruesi* downplay or even deny the possibility of total dissociation. Moreover, the presumption is that all senior teachers, except in the cases of a few specialized forms of esoteric knowledge such as midwifery or massage, are and will be men, because only men possess the moral and psychic integrity necessary to endure possession by the potent *ruesi* and other empowered teachers within the lineage.

*Possession by a communal tutelary or guardian spirit.* This form of spirit possession and tradition of spirit mediumship encompasses a considerable variety of substantively different kinds of communal spirit cults which all serve to ensure collective morality and guarantee collective prosperity regardless of how either of those concerns are specifically defined or symbolically elaborated.<sup>20</sup> These various types of communal spirit cults have received extensive attention in the ethnographic literature on Thailand, and consequently the form of spirit possession and mediumship frequently associated with them has also received considerable attention as well. The two most commonly observed general types of communal spirit cults which frequently, but not always, involve spirit possession and spirit mediumship are: territorial

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<sup>20</sup> In many ways this is the most troublesome of all the heuristic analytic categories I employ, precisely because of this diversity. There are many analytically significant differences between these various communal cults regarding the ethnographic particulars of membership and participation, ritual practices and legitimating ideologies. But again, when focusing on the ideology of spirit possession and the social role of spirit mediums, all of these discrete types of communal spirit cults share a number of key analytic features, and therefore I categorize them together solely for the purpose of the contrast with contemporary professional spirit mediums.

guardian spirit cults (Kirsch 1967; Kraisi 1967; Tambiah 1970: 263-284; Sanguan 1971: 214-216; Textor 1973: 614-625; Condominas 1975; Gandour and Gandour 1976; Wijeyewardene 1981: 3-4; Irvine 1982: 105-107; Lando 1983; Davis 1984; Wijeyewardene 1986: 147-149; Anuman 1986: 100-103; Brun 1993; Bilmes 1995; Formoso 1996c: 70-79; Formoso 1998: 13-16) and ancestral spirit cults (Sanguan 1971: 220-224; Turton 1972; Davis 1973; Textor 1973: 312-316; Hale 1979; Irvine 1982: 285-315; Cohen 1984; Cohen and Wijeyewardene 1984; Davis 1984; Mougne 1984; McMorran 1984; Tanabe 1991; Rhum 1994; Boonyong 2000; Pranee 2002). For the purposes of this comparative analysis, I treat matrilineal spirit cults in the North of Thailand, which have been analyzed extensively by Thai scholars, as a particular subtype of the more general category of ancestral spirit cults. Territorial and ancestral spirit cults are not always sharply distinguished by Thai practitioners, however. In fact, they can often overlap and fuse together, especially at the empirical level of the household or the village, two of the most fundamental types of social collectivities within traditional Thai rural society which rely on both kin-based and locality-based definitions of social and cultural membership.<sup>21</sup> One can also see considerable ideological, social and ritual overlap between territorial and ancestral spirit cults and what has been called founders cults in Southeast Asia (Tannenbaum and Kammerer 2003). As such, it may be more appropriate to view the former as typological variations within the latter more overarching analytic category.

The spirits at the center of these communal cults are typically classified as *phi* or *jao*, although sometimes the more honorific and Sanskritized *theparak* (“protective deity”) is also employed, particularly in the case of territorial guardian spirits. The most common terminology

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<sup>21</sup> Formoso (1996c: 74) notes that in Thailand and Laos many of the princes, warriors and monks who have founded and successfully led particular social collectivities are identified after their deaths as tutelary guardian spirits for those communities, and that, especially in the case of rural villages, “the spirits formed in this way are often considered communal ancestors.”



for a territorial guardian spirit of any sort is either *jao phau* (lord father) or *jao mae* (lord mother), although ancestral spirits constitute an inclusive if definitionally imprecise category of jurally superior kinsmen often referred to as either *phi pu ya* (spirits of paternal grandparents), *phi pu ta* (spirits of paternal and maternal grandfathers) or *phi pu ya ta yai* (spirits of paternal and maternal grandparents). These supramundane entities exert moral authority and jural control over actions within a discrete sphere of influence which is typically conceptualized as a bounded geographical domain in the case of territorial spirits<sup>22</sup> or a lineage / network of kin-related individuals in the case of ancestral spirits. Unlike malevolent spirits, however, their rule is institutionally grounded and socially embedded through the building of a shrine to house them, the appointment of a ritual specialist to look after their needs, and the performance of regular calendrical rites in propitiation of them.

These communal guardian spirits enforce general normative expectations, rules and taboos regarding proper behavior within their domain of influence, and are especially concerned with matters such as the movement of individuals in and out of their domain, the use of materials resources and social labor within their domain, and the initiation of collective work projects or

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<sup>22</sup> In ideal typical terms, the geographical domains over which guardian spirits hold sway reflect a general pattern of nested hierarchical encompassment which seems to parallel the Tai ideal of a hierarchical encompassment of human territorial jurisdictions, although this spiritual hierarchy is not always clearly or comprehensively elaborated upon in all specific concrete historical cases. Formoso (1998: 13) models the decreasing hierarchical encompassment of guardian spirits (*phi raksa* according to his terminology) as follows: At the top are the *phi satharana* (public spirits) who oversee large areas and even regions. Below them are *phi lak mueang* (spirits of the city pillar) and then *phi ban* (spirits of the village) who protect cities and villages, respectively. Below these guardian spirits are *phi* who protect a neighborhood, a monastery or a small natural geographic entity such as a pond. Finally, at the very bottom of the hierarchy are household spirits (*phi ruean*) and rice field spirits (*phi na*). Although Formoso does not comment on this fact, spirit possession, and especially spirit mediumship, seems to be more commonly, but not exclusively, associated with those spirits higher in the hierarchy of encompassing territorial (and thus, social) domains. I am aware of only one description in the ethnographic literature on Thailand, for example, describing possession by a household spirit (*phi ruean*), and this case is an involuntary possession which is not ritually induced (Textor 1973: 317). It is not surprising, accordingly, that I have not found any cases in which possession by household spirits or rice fields spirits has been converted into a persisting set of responsibilities requiring the formal and regular role of spirit medium, in part presumably because the social range of interested parties is so limited. In other words, traditionally a spirit medium must serve a social collectivity which is reasonably large in a demographic sense, like a village or kin-group, and thus even an extended household is too small to warrant the necessity that some individual take on the formal role of a spirit medium who can induce possession voluntarily, regularly and on demand when required.

ceremonies within their domain. As moral custodians and disciplinarians they punish those individuals who violate these norms with misfortunes and afflictions, typically illnesses of one sort or another, but they are not perceived as acting capriciously. In return for proper normative conduct and regular propitiation by those under their rule, they grant a range of collective benefits such as generalized good fortune and success, as well as more specific rewards such as agricultural fertility, economic prosperity, and protection from violence and natural disasters. In addition, however, households and individuals also may seek from these communal spirits more specific favors only relevant to themselves, and they do so by pledging in a contractual manner to provide the tutelary spirit with a particular offering if, and only after, the tutelary spirits has bestowed the favor they are seeking.

All of these communal cults require a ritual intermediary who coordinates interactions between the spirits and their human dependents and who takes on a central leadership role during rites centered on the tutelary spirits, rituals such as collective and individual acts of propitiation and divination, as well as the making of vows (*bon ban*) and the giving of thanks for vows fulfilled (*kae bon*). Although this ritual intermediary may have been chosen initially for his or her role via possession by the spirit, subsequent possession is not common or expected and thus these ritual intermediaries are not identified as spirit mediums.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, it is common for these cults also to have a spirit medium who serves alongside the ritual intermediary.<sup>24</sup> These

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<sup>23</sup> This distinction is clearly indicated in the ethnographic material from the Northeast of Thailand in which the ritual intermediaries and spirit mediums involved in these communal cults are given distinct titles and different individuals hold these distinct ritual responsibilities. In the Northeast, the ritual intermediary has typically been called a *cham*, while the spirit medium was called a *tian*. The specific terms for these different ritual offices can vary considerably across the different regions and locales of Thailand. See Tambiah (1970: 263-311) for a detailed discussion of the case in one Northeastern village.

<sup>24</sup> The ethnographic and historical evidence concerning the affiliation of spirit mediums with these cults is very partial and uneven in its coverage, but the evidence does show that spirit mediums are not consistently affiliated with these cults nor do they have to be for the cults to persist. Only sometimes do territorial cults and ancestral cults have a spirit medium, but Wijeyewardene suggests that though mediums may have been rare at times, “most cult groups would have liked to have had one” (Wijeyewardene 1986: 146). He also notes that the presence or absence of

spirit mediums are also chosen by the ruling spirits, with the indications of this choice marked by an initial bout of involuntary possession and physical suffering. Once this individual, who may be a man or a woman, accepts his or her new status as a spirit medium, his or her future role in the cult requires subsequent regularized bouts of possession in order to provide direct communication with the relevant communal spirits as it is needed. The spirit medium assists in the full range of collective and individual rites of propitiation, divination and vow-making centered on the spirits. Nonetheless, Tambiah's detailed analysis of the role of spirit mediums in a Northeastern cult of the guardian spirit indicates that spirit mediums are particularly relied upon to interpret and resolve cases of severe illness resulting from punitive action by the communal spirits themselves (Tambiah 1970: 278-280).

Most noteworthy from a comparative perspective is that possession by a communal tutelary or guardian spirit is the only indigenous modality of spirit possession within lowland Thai society and culture which is associated with a tradition of publicly recognized and socially valorized spirit mediumship.<sup>25</sup> In other words, traditionally within Thai Theravada Buddhist society it is only in the context of these communal spirit cults that the experience of spirit possession is associated with, and transformed into, the positively valued social role of a spirit medium who is regularly subject to recurring bouts of voluntary spirit possession.<sup>26</sup> Thus, in

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a spirit medium in these cults may be connected with historically changing variables, such as the influence of formal administrative officials like village headmen or monks who sometimes discourage the practice of mediumship, or the potentially temporary fact that no individual is currently seen as appropriate for the office or has yet to make a claim to it (149).

<sup>25</sup> In the interest of historical and analytic simplicity, I have not included within my comparative framework of discrete modes of Thai spirit possession and spirit mediumship forms of spirit possession and shamanism found among upland Thai tribal and ethnic minorities. Rather, I have restricted my empirical data to only those forms of spirit possession and spirit mediumship found among those social formations which have adopted the hegemonic religious framework of Theravada Buddhist inclusive syncretism. These social formations are, for the most part, limited to lowland and traditionally peasant agricultural societies and cultures.

<sup>26</sup> The one empirically well documented exception in the Thai ethnographic literature to this general assertion is the case of the *mau phi* whom Kirsch encountered during his fieldwork in the Northeast in the 1960s. These "spirit doctors" originally suffer from an illness which is subsequently identified as possession by the "familiar spirit" of another spirit doctor. Once they accept this fact and perform the appropriate "thanking the spirits" (*khaup khun phi*)

contrast to possession by a malevolent spirit, in the context of communal spirit cults of various kinds the suffering and afflictions associated with spirit possession can be transformed into a predominantly socially valued experience via the domestication of the possessing spirit and the attribution and acceptance by the afflicted individual of a new social role as a spirit medium.<sup>27</sup> This dynamic is largely due to the fact that the possessing spirits are perceived as potentially punitive yet nonetheless essentially benevolent in character. Thus, rather than exorcism and the permanent rupturing of any ongoing relationship with a malevolent possessing spirit, the general strategy in the case of communal spirit cults, instead, is submission, reconciliation and the cementing of a persistent, publicly recognized but regulated ritual relationship. In the same vein

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ceremony they then recover and subsequently continue to be regularly possessed by their “familiar spirit” in order to assist other villagers suffering from health problems (Kirsch 1967: 377-378). There is no indication in Kirsch’s work, however, that these “spirit doctors” are associated in any way with the communal cults of either ancestral or territorial spirits. Kirsch in fact explicitly identifies a separate category of animistic specialist, the “Owner (or Guardian) of the Spirits of the Paternal Grandparents” (*jao phi pu ta*) who attends to the shrine of the village ancestral spirits and acts as its ritual intermediary but who is not himself ever possessed (Kirsch 1967: 378-380). Although Kirsch cites one case of supplication in which this ritual intermediary works in concert with a “spirit doctor” to request rainfall, it is not clear if this coordinated activity is a regular affair (Kirsch 1967: 401-402). Nor is it exactly clear what structural relationship, if any, exists between the “familiar spirits” of the *mau phi* and the “Spirits of the Paternal Grandparents” of the *jao phi pu ta*, although Kirsch mentions a single case in which the election of a new *jao phi pu ta* was achieved by getting the “familiar spirit” of one *mau phi* to communicate with the tutelary *phi pu ta* (Kirsch 1967: 380). Furthermore, none of the ritual activities of the *mau phi* which Kirsch describes seem to be related in any sense to the traditional types of annual or ad hoc rites addressed to either ancestral or territorial spirits which are described elsewhere in the ethnographic literature (Kirsch 1967: 395-402). It is perhaps possible that these spirit mediums of “spirit familiars” represents a separate and distinct tradition of Thai spirit possession and spirit mediumship. In his fieldwork in North-Central Thailand, for instance, Kemp (1992: 184, 186-187) also encountered spirit mediums (*khon song*) who regularly become possessed in order to both first diagnose what spirits are afflicting individuals and later feast the relevant spirits and provide them with the offerings they require to stop the afflictions. These spirit mediums are also possessed by familiar spirits (*phi long*) that seem to have no relation to any communal ancestral or territorial spirit cults, neither of which was found in the villages Kemp studied. But Kemp’s discussion is so brief, like most ethnographic descriptions of spirit possession and spirit mediumship in the academic literature on Thailand, that it lacks the necessary information to determine definitively just how similar it is in ideology, practice or social organization with other types of possession and mediumship encountered by other scholars, including Kirsch’s *mau phi*.

<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, although the experience of spirit possession and the role of spirit medium within these communal cults is ascribed a relatively positive social value, especially when compared with other forms of spirit possession within Thai society, it should be kept in mind that both the experience of possession and the occupant of the role are still not given a terribly significant amount of social esteem or cultural authority in general. Instead, the general impression one gets from the ethnographic literature is that traditionally the ritual intermediary was perceived as more important and ritually crucial than the spirit medium to the ongoing success and perpetuation of these communal cults. In this sense, ritual intermediaries were an absolute necessity while spirit mediums were a luxury, so to speak (Tambiah 1970: 282). This fact inevitably influences the relative social and religious status and authority of spirit mediums in general within their respective communities.

then and in contrast to all other Thai cultural forms of spirit possession, in the case of communal spirit cults regular communication with the possessing spirit is not only desired, it is the central purpose of possession, because all the members of a community desire a reliable means by which to directly communicate with the ruling spirits regarding complicated and ambiguous matters such as how to interpret experiences of affliction or what proper methods of propitiation are required to ensure collective and individual prosperity.

Neither playful revelry with a temporary guest, dire combat with a malevolent, disruptive intruder, nor the intimate submission of identification with a distant but august teacher, the overall mood of spirit possession in a communal spirit cult is one of hesitant beseeching before a powerful and sovereign overlord who is simultaneously protective and punishing, benevolent and fierce, generous and demanding. The acquisition of auspiciousness, blessings, and benefits, and the avoidance of inauspiciousness and dangers, is crucial to the whole purpose and social value of spirit possession in communal spirit cults, in contrast to those other indigenous Thai forms of spirit possession already discussed. Moreover, the power of supramundane intervention exercised by the territorial or ancestral spirits is only pertinent to those individuals active within those spheres of influence over which the ruling spirits exercise authority. The spirits cannot assist or punish those beyond the permeable, but nonetheless restricted, boundaries of those spheres of influence. Although not initially desired or cultivated as such, this form of spirit possession does become a regular if nonetheless infrequent occurrence. The spirit medium must also learn to be able to initiate the experience of possession voluntarily according to situational demands, whether in regards to the ad hoc demands of individuals suffering from afflictions or those regular calendrical and life-cycle ritual obligations associated with the communal cult. Finally, in conformity with general Thai expectations, possession by an ancestral or territorial

spirit is supposed to induce complete dissociation. In addition, the ethnographic literature indicates that both men and women can become spirit mediums in communal spirit cults. Nonetheless, the ethnographic literature also seems to provide more cases of women than men occupying the official role of spirit medium in these spirit cults, and Tambiah notes that although the role is not confined to women, it emphasizes a “feminine syndrome of behavior” such that frequently those men who assume the role are identified as either transvestites or ambiguous in some way in their masculine identity (Tambiah 1970: 284).<sup>28</sup>

*Chinese spirit mediums and spirit possession.* There exists very little historical or ethnographic research into Chinese spirit possession and spirit mediumship in Thailand, past or present, just as there exists a relative paucity of research on Chinese popular religion in Thailand more generally.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, it is clear that the waves of Chinese immigrants to Thailand over the centuries, regardless of whether they were Teochiew, Hokkien, Hakka or Cantonese, brought with them to Thailand a broad range of popular Chinese religious beliefs, rituals and roles which they subsequently elaborated upon as they established communal shrines and temples in the communities throughout urban and rural Thailand within which they took up residence. Spirit mediumship is a central feature of mainland Chinese popular religiosity, including the southeast coast of China from which many of Thailand’s Chinese immigrants originated. Hence, it is natural to assume that within the Chinese communities of Thailand there has also existed, since the earliest times, spirit mediums who have been possessed by various Chinese deities – an act of possession which transformed the human medium by making him invulnerable to pain,

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<sup>28</sup> Kirsch also observes that there were significantly more women than men who were *mau phi* in the Northeastern region he studied (Kirsch 1967: 474). In certain communal spirit cults, such as those associated with matrilineal kinship lineages in the North of Thailand, spirit mediums are by definition only and exclusively women.

<sup>29</sup> For works that focus narrowly and specifically on Chinese religion, and Chinese popular religion, in Thailand, see Tobias (1973), Formoso (1996a), Hamilton (1999), Cohen (2001), Hill (2001). For other works which are more broadly focused on the Chinese community and Chinese ethnicity in Thailand but which nonetheless significantly expand and deepen our understanding of Chinese religion in Thailand in the process, see Skinner (1957), Tobias (1977), Hill (1992), Formoso (1996b).

empowered to write and read magical charms, and capable of communicating with the dead, divining fortunes, healing illnesses and dispensing religious blessings. Most scholarly discussions of Chinese spirit mediumship in Thailand, however, describe and analyze Chinese spirit possession in the context of the crucial role it plays within the encompassing ritual frame of the annual Chinese Vegetarian Festival, a ceremony which has been celebrated by the Sino-Thai community in the South of Thailand since at least the nineteenth century (Yuthana 1998: 126-131; Cohen 2001: 115-147).<sup>30</sup> There are a limited number of sustained descriptions and analyses of Chinese spirit mediums in Thailand in the context of everyday activities at communal shrines or temples (Cohen 2001; Cohen 2009; Cohen 2012).<sup>31</sup>

In Thailand according to the academic literature, Chinese spirit mediums are known as *tang ki* (youthful diviners), are typically young, and are predominantly male. Typically they are perceived to be individuals who suffer from a poor astrological fate and thus are destined to die young. By becoming spirit mediums those in danger are understood to delay an early death, and this extension of their life is conceptualized as a bargain struck between themselves and the possessing god (*shen*) who demands their service as a medium in return for an extended life.

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<sup>30</sup> When and where exactly the Vegetarian Festival was first celebrated in southern Thailand is a matter of uncertainty and contestation between various Southern communities. See Cohen (2001: 47-64) for a discussion of the history and expansion of the festival in the South of Thailand. In the master narrative of the Chinese Vegetarian Festival, the annual celebration is ritually focused around the goddess Doumu and her sons, the Nine Emperor Gods. In the mythology of the festival, the latter descend from heaven during the festival, but it is only less authoritative and powerful gods in the Chinese pantheon who actually possess spirit mediums during the festival. The themes of asceticism, ritual purification, social renewal and divine blessing are interwoven throughout the various rites of propitiation, procession and self-mortification which are practiced over the course of the festival. Cohen provides a description and brief analysis of the festival as a ritual process (Cohen 2001: 75-114). His description and analysis are based on his ethnographic study of the festival in the late 1990s in Phuket, where the largest and most famous local Thai version of the festival is currently held.

<sup>31</sup> Consequently, it is practically impossible to describe or analyze very authoritatively Thai traditions of Chinese spirit mediumship in a manner comparable to those more socially and historically comprehensive studies of Chinese spirit mediumship prevalent elsewhere in the Southeast Asian Chinese diaspora. The classic example of such a study is Elliot's examination of Chinese spirit medium cults in Singapore just after World War II (Elliot 1955). Ju (1983) and Tong (1989) provide more current descriptions of Chinese spirit mediums in Singapore. Lee (1986) describes continuities and changes in Chinese spirit mediumship and folk religion in urban Malaysia in the early 1980s, while Ackerman (2001) examines contemporary transformations in Malaysian Chinese spirit mediumship and folk religion as they encounter both state-mediated economic and bureaucratic rationalization and the contemporary revitalization and valorization of Chinese culture.

This relationship is ideally exclusive, with no other deity henceforth able to possess the spirit medium. It is generally believed that only those Chinese divinities located in the lower ranks of the pantheon possess humans, and that this possession involves the displacement of the medium's soul while the god is in residence. Consequently, mediums typically claim that they cannot recall anything that occurred while they were possessed. Illness followed by involuntary possession are the stereotypic indicators that a god has chosen an individual to be a medium, although whether one has been possessed by either a ghost or a deity is only determined after careful examination by an established spirit medium who must induce the possessing entity to speak out and identify itself. Most individuals claim that they were reluctant to become a spirit medium or actively resisted that consequence, but that eventually they consented or were forced to accept their fate lest they risk death.

While in a state of possession, Chinese spirit mediums perform a crucial role in many major communal ritual events within the Thai Chinese community. During the Thai Chinese Vegetarian Festival, for instance, they convey not only the instructions, demands, and wishes of the visiting deities regarding the performance of the ritual, but they also serve to purify communal social space from various supramundane dangers while simultaneously extending general blessings to everyone who participates in the festival. During these ceremonial events, the spirit medium's assistance as diviners, oracles and healers is also sought out by those individuals in need who are seeking personalized attention and blessings. If we can assume that Elliot's observations about spirit-medium cults in Singapore are accurate for Chinese shrines and temples in Thailand, Chinese spirit mediums serve a similar set of collective and individual needs and interests during other collective ritual events within the Thai Chinese community throughout the year (Elliot 1955).



In Thailand, just as is the case in mainland China and within the Southeast Asian Chinese diaspora more generally, Chinese spirit mediums are renowned for their acts of dramatic self-mortification, which not only confirm the authenticity of possession by a benevolent and protective divinity but which in their fierceness also help the medium to purify communal social space by frightening away malevolent spiritual forces. This self-mortification can include the piercing of various body parts with objects such as needles, daggers and skewers, the pounding of backs with “prickballs,” the cutting of tongues with ax blades, and the performance of feats of prowess such as walking over hot coals and broken glass or climbing a ladder of sharpened steel blades.<sup>32</sup> While they are possessed during ceremonial occasions, Chinese spirit mediums are dependent upon a retinue of assistants who translate their commands and advice to officials, followers or clients and who help the *tang ki* in carrying out various ritual services or acts of self-mortification.

Little has been documented about the social organization and ritual practices of Thai Chinese spirit mediums outside of the context of the Vegetarian Festival. However, if Lee’s observations about Chinese spirit mediums in urban Malaysia in the 1980s are any indication (Lee 1986), we can conjecture that in Thailand, as in Malaysia, there are two broad ways of organizing the social practices of Chinese spirit mediums. One type of spirit medium is affiliated with a temple as an employee, receiving a modest monthly salary and the ritual assistance of other temple members. In return, these mediums provide a variety of services to the temple. These include participation in the processions and self-mortifications associated with large-scale Chinese calendrical rites and the birthday celebrations of patron deities, the regular provision of

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<sup>32</sup> Cohen provides an interesting analysis of historical changes in the types of objects spirit mediums use to pierce themselves in the Phuket Vegetarian Festival, examining how both broader social changes and the increasingly spectacular and touristic elements within the celebration have influenced these forms of self-mortification (Cohen 2001: 132-143).

personal consultations to individuals seeking oracular advice, séances with the dead, the blessing of magical talismans and the divinatory insights of automatic writing. The second type of spirit medium is more like an individual entrepreneur. They are not affiliated with a temple, although they may once have been. Instead, they operate out of their home – part of which has been converted into a chamber for consultation – and often rely, at least in the early stages of their career, on ritual assistance provided by friends and family. They also typically provide a similar range of general, and individually idiosyncratic, services to clients through personal consultations, but their annual festivals, if they hold any, are much smaller and less coordinated than those of temples.

Many of the general contours of the experience, ideology, and practice of Chinese spirit mediumship are broadly similar to characteristic elements found within indigenous Thai traditions of spirit mediumship associated with territorial or ancestral spirit cults. In both, the onset of spirit mediumship is thematized as first a vague illness, then involuntary possession, followed by resistance and eventual acceptance of the new social role of medium and the religious responsibilities associated with it. Similarly, both cultural forms of spirit mediumship are oriented exclusively towards a general set of thaumaturgic ends, with healing and divination occupying a central focus of concern. Both roles are conceptualized as types of servitude towards essentially benevolent but potentially mercurial deities, and as a religious responsibility which although important to the successful perpetuation of communal affairs, does not necessarily infuse their occupants with a very high social or religious status.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Cohen comments that in Phuket only the senior (and usually by implication elderly) spirit mediums, who are possessed by the more senior and authoritative Chinese gods, are accorded significant social status due to their religious role. Most mediums in the Vegetarian Festival, however, are possessed by more lowly divinities, and it is these mediums who are prone to more exaggerated and gruesome acts of self-mortification (Cohen 2001: 117, 125).

However, there are also unique elements of Chinese spirit mediumship which draw on beliefs and practices found more generally in Chinese culture and which stand out in contrast not only to spirit mediumship within Thai communal spirit cults, but all types of indigenous Thai spirit possession. Some of these include: the legitimating ideology that spirit mediumship is a contract to avoid an early death; the use of certain thaumaturgic techniques such as soul raising,<sup>34</sup> automatic writing or the inscribing of paper talismans (*fu*) with the blood of the medium; the strong emphasis on certain ritual elements such as self-mortification, mass public processions and reliance on a retinue of assistants; the necessary centrality of spirit mediumship to important communal celebrations within Chinese social life; and the fact that Thai Chinese spirit mediums are almost exclusively male.

Just as, if not more, importantly, however, the social organization of Chinese spirit mediumship is markedly different from indigenous Thai spirit mediumship. Spirit mediums are either the occupants of a specific office within a larger, formally organized institution like a temple or the charismatic, enterprising organizers of a loosely organized and articulated “cultic” milieu focused exclusively on themselves. Neither of these models for organizing the charismatic authority of a spirit medium have any parallels in the traditional organization of Thai spirit mediumship as it occurs within communal rural spirit cults, and both of these modes of practice seem to involve a much more frequent, sustained and regular experience of possession than is the case with spirit mediums associated with either territorial or ancestral spirit cults.

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<sup>34</sup> Bilmes (1995) describes how, in the Northern Thai village he has studied, the spirit mediums of village guardian spirits, in addition to the more typical range of personalized thaumaturgic services described in the ethnographic literature, can also become possessed by the spirits of recently deceased persons. They do so in order that surviving family members can communicate with the spirits of recently departed relatives about their current state of affairs and what offerings they desire. I am not aware of any other cases of this practice in the English-language academic literature on spirit possession in Thailand, however. Nor have I witnessed such a practice. However, several informants and Thai academic colleagues have described such practices as relatively common, at least in the past. It might, therefore, be the case that Bangkok professional spirit mediums – the focus of my research – typically decline to engage in anything like “soul raising.” While in the field, however, I never inquired about this practice.

*Hindu spirit mediums and spirit possession.* There is no existing scholarly research on spirit possession within the Hindu Indian diaspora of Thailand, only brief and superficial journalistic investigations (Sudara 1985). In general, the Hindu Indian diaspora in Thailand is much smaller demographically and considerably less socially influential or culturally prominent when compared with the Chinese diaspora, even though Indian have an equally long heritage of migration to Thailand also stretching back several centuries. More importantly, there are many fewer Hindu temples in the country and, when compared to the Chinese community, spirit possession does not seem to be as ritually prominent or as commonly practiced within the religious life of the Thai Hindu Indian community. As far as I can determine, possession of Indian devotees by Hindu deities only occurs at one Hindu temple in Thailand, the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple on Silom Road in Bangkok, and only at one time of year, during the annual Navarathri Festival.<sup>35</sup>

As a result, Hindu spirit mediumship receives much less public attention within Thailand, and exerts much less social and religious influence on general Thai ideas about spirit possession and spirit mediums than Chinese spirit mediumship. Nonetheless, this festival currently draws thousands of spectators each year from throughout Bangkok and beyond, including dozens if not hundreds of professional spirit mediums who attend as observers along the festival's procession route. Consequently, although likely more modest in terms of both its historical precedence and cultural influence than many other forms of spirit possession and spirit mediumship in Thai society, Hindu spirit possession and spirit mediumship constitutes a discrete tradition which deserves at least brief consideration given its increasing prominence in Bangkok's public

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<sup>35</sup> It is unclear both how long this festival has been celebrated at this Tamil temple as well as how long the practice of spirit possession has been associated with the festival.

religious life in recent years. It also draws considerable attention from Bangkok professional spirit mediums.

The Navarathri festival, lasting ten days every October, is intended to celebrate the triumph of the goddess Umathewi over hordes of violent and evil ogres. Most ceremonial activity during the festival consists of daily rituals of propitiation, worship and *darsan* (seeing a divine presence) organized and mediated by the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple's Brahman officiants. It is only on the last evening of the festival that possession occurs. Three male Hindu devotees, who have previously subjected themselves to weeks of ritual self-purification in anticipation of this night, invite the goddesses Umathewi and Kali and the god Muragan down to possess them in the inner sanctum of the temple. After submitting themselves to mild bodily self-mortification, these spirit mediums then proceed to join in the final night's triumphant exit of their possessing god's temple images, which are ensconced in enormous chariots, out of the temple and around the local neighborhood in a procession which can last seven or eight hours. Throughout the procession, these spirit mediums offer general blessings of auspiciousness to all devotees – regardless of whether they are Indian, Thai or Chinese – who have set up small temporary shrines along the procession route. Outside the ritual procession the mediums do not become possessed either spontaneously or otherwise. They subsequently return to their normal occupations and wait to see if they will be chosen again as the deities' mediums next year.

Hindu spirit mediums share many general social characteristics with Chinese spirit mediums. They are possessed by unambiguously benevolent supramundane entities.<sup>36</sup> They voluntarily cultivate the experience of possession, although possession can only occur during this one cosmologically and ritually portentous time of the year. They are affiliated with well-

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<sup>36</sup> These Indian gods also seem to rest higher in their respective pantheon than is the case with most Chinese gods who possess Chinese spirit mediums.

established community temples, and not merely local shrines. They engage in mild bodily self-mortification as a sign of both authentic possession and the benevolent spiritual prowess of the possessing god who protects the possessed devotee from any pain or suffering. Their general public presence is most prominent during public processions when a broad range of the Thai public beyond the regular boundaries of the temple community observe and take part in the auspiciousness of the ceremonial occasion. Unlike Chinese spirit mediums, however, the cultural meaning of Indian spirit possession in Thailand is framed exclusively within the boundaries of one evening during a single annual collective ceremony; these spirit mediums are not regularly possessed by Hindu gods and it is not even clear that they will be possessed again in the future. And although there is a continuity in the sense that the position of spirit medium is perpetuated year after year, there is not necessarily any continuity in the individuals who hold that position. Thus, although it is an honor and a relative boon to one's social status to be selected to be a medium, this honor is only very temporary. Finally, although the expectation is that possession will result in a state of total dissociation conforms to indigenous Thai presumptions, in stark contrast to traditional Thai conventions about who is most likely to be possessed, within the Indian tradition of Thailand represented at this temple only devout Hindu males are deemed pure and virtuous enough to be possessed by these divinities.

### **Contemporary Thai Professional Spirit Possession and Spirit Mediums**

Scholars who have studied in any significant depth the Thai religious actors I am calling "professional spirit mediums" all agree that they are a relatively new social phenomenon in twentieth-century Thai society (Irvine 1982: 316-381; Irvine 1984; Wijeyewardene 1986: 153-236; Yagi 1988; Muecke 1992; Morris 1994; Morris 1996; Pattana 1999; Morris 2000; Tanabe

2000a; Grow 2002; Pattana 2002; Anan 2003; Pattana 2005a; Pattana 2005b; Tanabe 2002; Patamajorn 2007; Yos 2009; Fukuura 2011; Johnson 2011; Fukuura 2012; Jackson 2012; Johnson 2012; Pattana 2012; Tanabe 2013).<sup>37</sup> However, there is some disagreement or inconclusiveness concerning many basic ethnographic issues concerning this type of Thai spirit possession and mediumship such as: how should they be labeled in the academic English-language scholarship, what particular characteristics are most defining of their sociocultural distinctiveness, when and where did they first emerge, what were the social preconditions and structural transformations which gave rise to them, and how are they related to other forms of Thai spirit possession and spirit mediumship. Examining each of these issues in this chapter, therefore, will help to clarify exactly who these new religious actors are, where they are located within the larger diverse field of mainstream Thai popular religiosity, and what is their relationship to Theravada Buddhism, the dominant religious ideology and institutional force shaping the field of Thai religiosity.

### **Scholarly Terms of Reference**

The religious specialists I refer to as “professional spirit mediums” consistently, and most typically, refer to themselves, and are described by other Thais, in the Central Thai dialect as *rang song* or *khon song*. Colloquially, both of these terms are conventionally translated into

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<sup>37</sup> There are several scholars who have studied what I am calling professional Thai spirit mediums, but whose studies have not focused primarily upon this particular type of spirit medium or who have not found it very useful, empirically or analytically, to distinguish this type of spirit mediumship from other types of Thai spirit mediums or spirit possession (see, for instance, Luck 1996). Sometimes this lack of distinction is because these scholars are examining spirit possession as just one particular instance of a more general Thai practice and logic of interactions between humans and a diverse range of supramundane entities, not all of which possess humans (Golomb 1985; Brun 1993). Sometimes this ambiguity is a consequence of the fact that these scholars are examining spirit possession through the framework of trance as a universal religious phenomenon, and thus are not terribly interested in emic distinctions, or even question about cultural, social and historical particularity from an etic perspective. See, for example, Heinze’s relatively uniform – and primarily descriptive – discussion of what I believe are actually very different cultural forms, social traditions and phenomenological experiences of spirit possession and spirit mediumship in Thailand (Heinze 1997: 198-226).

English as “spirit medium,” and academics (both Thais and foreigners) have, consequently, generally referred to these actors as “spirit mediums” in the English-language academic scholarship.<sup>38</sup> But *khon song* is a word with a long history in the Thai language. It has been used as a general cover term since at least the mid-nineteenth century to refer to many of the diverse types of indigenous spirit possession and spirit mediums found within Thailand, and thus has also been used to refer to contemporary professional spirit mediums.<sup>39</sup> In this sense, *khon song* is one of the most common terms, perhaps the most common term, used to refer to anyone possessed by *phi*, *jao*, or *thep*, as well as at times to refer to the mediums of territorial protective spirits, of ancestral tutelary spirits, and of Chinese gods, of Hindu gods and even of bodhisattvas and *ruesi*.<sup>40</sup> Because the conventional English translation of *khon song*, “spirit medium,” inevitably refers to this wide assortment of various types of spirit possession and spirit mediumship in Thai society and history, those academics who are particularly interested in distinguishing this newly emergent and more contemporary type of spirit mediumship from other forms of spirit mediumship also found in Thailand, past and present, have added a series of adjectival qualifiers to the English term “spirit medium.”

One typical strategy is to oppose “modern” and “traditional” spirit mediums and mediumship (Luck 1996; Anan 2000). In this scheme, the new type of spirit mediums constitutes the “modern,” while all other forms of spirit mediumship, but especially the spirit mediums

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<sup>38</sup> A few scholars have employed the concepts “shaman” or “shamanism” to talk about these actors, but this language is much less typical in the academic literature on trance and possession in lowland Theravada Buddhist Thailand. However, for an example, see Gandour and Gandour (1976) or Textor (1973).

<sup>39</sup> Pallegoix’s Thai-English dictionary from the mid-nineteenth century includes the term *khon song* (Pallegoix 1972 [1854]: 304) and Bastian records the use of the term in the first half of the nineteenth century as well (Oesterreich 1966: 352-353). I will explore the practical complications and ambiguities in translating *khon song* into English in a non-academic context later in this chapter.

<sup>40</sup> Apparently the term *khon song* has also been used at times in an expansive semantic sense to refer to forms of spirit possession, like malevolent possession requiring exorcism, which do not involve the regular possession associated with spirit mediums, as well as even other types of religious actors, such as sorcerers and witches, which are often in conventional academic discourse analytically distinguished from spirit mediums.



associated with guardian and ancestral spirit cults, constitute the “traditional” pole within this conceptual duality. Yet this distinction typically tells us very little about the particular ethnographic or analytic differences between these types of spirit mediumship, mainly because few of these scholars have explicitly or clearly theorized how this new type of mediumship is related to their conception of “modernity” or “the modern.” Rather, primarily what “modern” seems to signify for these scholars is that this new type of spirit mediumship is a recent innovation, an assertion which I believe can be conveyed just as easily by “contemporary” or “twentieth-century” instead of “modern.” In addition, this distinction runs the risk of implying that the “traditional” forms of spirit mediumship are no longer practiced currently (which is clearly not true) or that they are slowly, inevitably fading away as evolutionary relics (despite the fact that some scholars have seen signs of their contemporary resurgence). Most importantly, the label “traditional” threatens to classify as essentially similar or identical what I argue are an historically diverse range of distinct cultural forms of spirit possession and social traditions of spirit mediumship. As should be clear from my previous classificatory distinction between discrete cultural forms of spirit possession and social traditions of spirit mediumship, I believe that these forms and traditions need to be substantively and analytically distinguished for important historical, ethnographic and analytic reasons. Conflating them all under the label “traditional,” consequently, makes it more difficult to understand each of them on their own particular terms within the complex domain of Thai cosmology, beliefs and practice. This conflation also makes it more difficult, in fact, to analyze significant differences in the relationship between different cultural form of spirit possession and/or social tradition of spirit mediumship and those innovative beliefs and practices associated with the new type of “modern” spirit mediumship which I and some other scholars label as “professional.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> These relationships should be examined from two different analytic directions. First, there is the changing

A somewhat different tact is taken, for instance, by Pattana, who distinguishes between “folk spirit-medium cults” and “urban spirit-medium cults” in his study of the latter in the provincial capital of Khorat in the Northeast of Thailand in the 1990s (Pattana 1999: 86-96).<sup>42</sup> The new type of spirit mediums who have only recently emerged in Thai history constitute the “urban spirit-medium cults” while older traditions of spirit mediumship, presumably primarily associated with ancestral and territorial spirit cults, belong to the category of “folk spirit-medium cults.” Although raising valuable analytic distinctions in the comparative analysis of Thai spirit mediumship, this dualistic classification is nonetheless confusing. “Folk,” after all, does not necessarily stand in clear analytic opposition to “urban.” Rather, typically “rural” stands in opposition to “urban,” while the categorical contrast with “folk” is typically more ambiguous – “popular,” “commercial,” or “elite” often stand more readily in contrast to “folk” than “urban.”

In his overall analysis, in fact, Pattana seems to be drawing implicitly at various times on many of these different possible analytic contrasts when distinguishing between the two forms of spirit mediumship, although his primary emphasis seems to be on the fact that this new form of spirit mediumship had its origins in urbanized social environments and responds to social and psychological needs particularly unique to urban life. This analytic conflation is an empirical problem, however, because the new type of spirit mediumship is not always or even necessarily

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historical and sociocultural relationship between different forms of spirit possession and spirit mediumship, and the degree to which at any given time the members belonging to any one tradition have – explicitly or implicitly – drawn on, or distanced themselves from, another tradition’s complex of beliefs and practices within mainstream Thai popular religiosity. Second, there is the changing rhetorical relationship between these different cultural forms of possession and mediumship within the general field of Thai popular religiosity, a relationship which emerges most prominently within the competing discursive representations of the category “modern” spirit mediumship. In the contemporary era, both professional spirit mediums and their critics deploy ideologically-charged representations of various contrasting forms of Thai spirit possession and spirit mediumship identified as “traditional” as they seek either to advance or undermine the claims to religious authenticity, authority and legitimacy made by professional spirit mediums. I address both of these issues from the perspective of contemporary Bangkok professional spirit mediums later in this chapter.

<sup>42</sup> Yagi (1988) also emphasizes that the specific large-scale movement he studied, Samnak Puu Sawan, is part of a broader milieu of new urban spirit medium cults, although he also fails to explain in clear terms the analytic significance of urbanism – as either a general social phenomenon or a specific social process – for interpreting or analyzing Samnak Puu Sawan or other new urban spirit medium cults more generally.

popular, commercial, elite or urban in character. Moreover, currently it is not only found in urban areas, while other forms of spirit mediumship which Pattana would presumably categorize as “folk” have also flourished in various Thai urban settings. Pattana’s analysis, therefore, never makes it fully clear exactly why and how spatiality as a determining social structure and process so fundamentally determines the character of this new type of spirit mediumship – in contrast to other previous forms of mediumship – such that it should be signaled out as characteristically urban in character.

Several other Thai scholars, although quite conscious of the broadly “modern” and “urban” character of this new style of mediumship, have instead chosen to explicitly label it as “professional” (Irvine 1982: 320; Morris 1994: 58; Grow 2002: 6; Tanabe 2002: 54; Guelden 2005b: 182) or have described those who practice it as “free-lance mediums” who are also “professionals,” thus evoking much the same image (Wijeyewardene 1986: 145, 157).<sup>43</sup> I have chosen to follow this nomenclature for several analytical and theoretical reasons. Rather than highlighting either temporality or spatiality as the most fundamentally determinative and distinguishing social factor shaping a particular form of belief and practice, as is the case with

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<sup>43</sup> Irvine’s position on spirit mediums in the Thai-Yuan culture of Northern Thailand in the late 1970s juxtaposes “urban” and “modern” in a more nuanced classificatory vision of different types of spirit mediumship. He first contrasts spirit mediumship in ancestral spirit cults, a cultural phenomenon found irregularly within the villages of Northern rural Thailand, with the urban spirit mediumship which has flourished only since the 1950s within certain towns in Northern Thailand, towns such as Chiang Mai, Lamphun, and Lampang. He then analytically distinguishes between two ideal-typical poles within this more recent urban tradition of spirit mediumship – a “modern” pole and a “traditional” pole. Irvine at certain points characterizes this “modern” pole of urban spirit mediumship as “professional spirit mediumship” (Irvine 1982: 320) and his general description corresponds rather closely with the social and cultural phenomenon I identify by the same label. Irvine’s “traditional” form of urban spirit mediumship is organized around a different and more restricted set of possessing *jao* – stereotypically characterized as *jao puu* (Lord Grandfather), *jao phau* (Lord Father), and *jao noi* (Minor Lord) – and mediums in this tradition do not claim strong affiliation with Buddhism as is the case with his “modern” urban professional spirit mediumship. Irvine’s recent tradition of urban spirit mediumship in the North – both “traditional” and “modern” – is reminiscent in many ways of the *jao phau* cults in the Bangkok region which Yagi examined in the 1980s as a form of “urban” spirit mediumship (Yagi 1988). What remains unclear and unexplored in the Thai ethnographic literature, however, is what historical, cultural and social relationship, if any, exists between Irvine’s urban spirit mediumship, Yagi’s *jao phau* urban spirit medium cults, and the “traditional” spirit mediumship associated with the guardian spirit cults of various towns, many of which also were organized around historically significant founding figures identified as *jao phau*.

the concepts “modern” and “urban,” “professional” emphasizes instead what is most uniquely defining of this form of spirit mediumship when compared with its predecessors: its distinctive style of organizing and interweaving social practice and cultural meaning. What is most defining about the meaning and practice of this new type of spirit mediumship, in other words, is not when or where it takes place. Rather, what is most defining of this new form of mediumship is, in my opinion, first, how the ongoing social relations and forms of exchange between spirit mediums, possessing spirits and clients have been newly reconfigured in a “professional” mode, and second, how the pragmatic self-understandings, cultural goals and social practices of both mediums and clients in their ongoing interactions also have been transformed to conform with this new mode of religious engagement with, and conceptualization of, the interactions between the supramundane order and humanity.

### **Defining Characteristics of Thai Professional Spirit Mediums as a New Religious Role and Identity**

At a substantive level, professional spirit mediumship as a total social phenomenon is a unique modality of spirit possession and spirit mediumship within twentieth-century Thai society and history, despite the clear evidence of its continuities with select cultural themes, symbolic forms and social relations also characteristic of other prior cultural forms of spirit possession and traditions of spirit mediumship found within Thailand. Part of its distinctiveness resides in the fact that this form of mediumship is characterized by numerous historically innovative elements of ideology, practice and social organization, a distinctiveness which is evident when one compares professional spirit mediums with those other forms of spirit possession and spirit mediumship I have previously discussed. Even more significantly, however, the unique character

of professional spirit mediumship is not simply a product of innovation regarding discrete cultural themes, symbolic forms or social relations, because numerous elements in the ideology, practice and sociality characteristic of professional spirit mediums are shared by other modalities of spirit possession and spirit mediumship. Rather, ultimately the distinctiveness of this type of mediumship lies more in the particular combination and integration of various elements of ideology, practice and sociality – some innovative, some “traditional” – out of which has been constituted a novel form of religious experience, action, and meaning as a total social phenomenon within contemporary Thai society and culture.

Therefore, I outline and briefly discuss those defining characteristics which make professional spirit mediumship stand out as a novel religious phenomenon within twentieth-century Thailand. In particular, I focus on three sociocultural dimensions: ideology and belief, ritual practices, and social organization. In a subsequent chapter I examine, within my field site in Bangkok during the 1990s, the social and cultural dynamics underlying and shaping the production and reproduction of professional spirit mediumship as a total social phenomenon characterized by both innovation and continuity in relation to not only other forms of Thai spirit possession and spirit mediumship but also the total field of contemporary mainstream Thai popular religiosity.

Defining Ideology of Professional Spirit Mediumship. Although one could point to a range of ideological changes which symbolize the sociocultural distinctiveness of professional spirit mediumship as a novel form of Thai religious experience, belief and practice, I focus on three changes which I see as especially significant: changes in the pantheon of spirits which can possess humans; changes in the relationship between spirit possession, spirit mediumship and

Buddhism; and changes in the rhetoric of hierarchy and authority between and among spirit mediums.

*Changes in the pantheon of possessing spirits.* One of the most defining characteristics of contemporary professional spirit mediumship, perhaps the single most important innovation which fuels so many other innovations, is how professional spirit mediums have significantly modified which categories of supramundane entities can legitimately be seen as possessing humans. Conventionally Thai Theravada Buddhism has only recognized *phi* and *jao* as capable of possessing humans. All of the professional spirit mediums I encountered, however, argue very explicitly that they are only possessed by *jao* and *thep*<sup>44</sup>, and that they are most definitely not possessed at all by *phi*.<sup>45</sup> This categorical distinction is reflected most clearly in a linguistic inversion: whereas most Thais outside the subculture typically refer to spirit possession by employing the conventional phrase *song jao khao phi* (“inhabited by a *jao* and entered by a *phi*”), professional spirit mediums and those familiar with its subculture speak instead of *song jao khao thep* (“inhabited by a *jao* and entered by a *thep*”). This latter phrase is quite unconventional in terms of its ideological message, thus explaining perhaps why it does not appear in any Thai dictionaries, past or present, as far as I can determine.<sup>46</sup> The moral and

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<sup>44</sup> The Thai terms *thep* and *thewada* are, for all pragmatic intents and purposes, equivalent. The academic literature on Thai Theravada Buddhism and syncretism typically prefers to use the more formal term *thewada*. Professional spirit mediums and their followers however usually use the somewhat more informal *thep*, and so I follow that convention when examining their beliefs and practices.

<sup>45</sup> Numerous other scholars studying professional spirit mediums have discovered and noted a similar set of claims and distinctions. See Irvine (1982), Wijeyewardene (1986), Yagi (1988), Muecke (1992), Pattana (1999), and Morris (2000). No one, however, has examined the ideological, social and practical implications of the idea that *thep* can possess humans in light of traditional Thai notions regarding cosmology, ritual practice, and religious roles, or more narrow issues such as the normative character of ritual interactions and exchanges between humans and supramundane entities.

<sup>46</sup> The cultural power and social significance of this categorical distinction and rhetorical inversion is indicated by the fact that during a brief period of public censure of professional spirit mediums in 1996, one spirit medium explicitly responded to a publicly prominent modernist reformist monk’s warnings about the moral dangers of *song jao khao phi* by asserting that, contrary to this monk’s assumptions, there was really only *song jao khao thep*. In this medium’s opinion, this fact directly refuted the charge that mediums were deceiving and taking advantage of anyone. Presumably, although *phi* in their malevolence and deceit might do such things, *jao* and, most importantly,

ideological connotations of the category *thep*, in fact, are crucial to the self-image of professional spirit mediums and, by extension, their reconceptualization of the charismatic religious authority and legitimacy they claim for themselves. This authority and legitimacy contrasts with that marginal social status and limited cultural authority ascribed to traditional Thai spirit mediumship according to the existing scholarly literatures of anthropology and history.

Through this linguistic inversion and categorical distinction concerning the types of entities which regularly possess them, professional spirit mediums simultaneously seek two goals that are, however, more than just rhetorical. On the one hand, they seek to distance themselves from the moral stigma, cultural marginalization, dubious authority and low religious status associated with many, if not most, traditional forms of spirit mediumship in Thai culture. On the other hand, they also seek to affiliate themselves with the widespread moral respect, considerable ritual authority and elevated cosmological status ascribed to benevolent *thep*, and to a certain degree *jao*, in Thai culture. *Thep*, in particular, are envisioned in Thai Theravada Buddhism as benevolent guardians of the Buddhist moral order and protectors of Buddhism and the Buddhist Sangha. These guardians and protectors are non-capricious, august and dignified in their benevolence, and in this sense they are strongly contrasted with both malicious, capricious *phi* and the disciplining, ambiguous benevolence of the lordly *jao*. However, *thep* (or equivalent Thai linguistic and conceptual cognates such as *thewada* and *deva*) are also considered to be extremely refined and elevated cosmological beings, so elevated that they appear distant and aloof from the specific activities and concerns of the average, individual Thai.<sup>47</sup>

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*thep* are only benevolent and trustworthy in character, and thus their mediums, in turn, could not be capable of the deceit, fraud and larceny that they were being accused of by their public critics. See the newspaper article "Complaints from Spirit Mediums," Nation Weekly, September 27, 1996, p. 30.

<sup>47</sup> This aloofness from affairs of commoners, however, does not seem to extend to ruling nobles and aristocrats. The latter seem to be able to more easily and more regularly interact with and call upon the sacral efficacy of *thep* through the intervention of Brahmanical religious experts, ritual mediators who traditionally have been centrally involved in the religious and ritual authority of the ruling courts of dominant political centers in the lowland Thai

This distance and aloofness on the part of *thep* is evident from the fact that typically during most large festivals or individual curing rites, the *thep* are involved only peripherally in the ritual at hand. Thus, during Thai religious festivals an altar laden with offerings is usually laid out for the benefit of that amorphous and not particularly well-defined miscellany of various supramundane entities (*sing saksid tang lai*), including *thep*, whose presence is requested at the ceremony.<sup>48</sup> Thais commonly believe that the *thep* respond to this invitation because they can karmically benefit from the opportunity to hear the teaching of the Buddhist Dharma. Therefore, they are invited to select festivals, and, in return, the *thep* are presumed to extend protection and auspiciousness over the ceremony and all who participate in it, ensuring the ceremony's success and the participant's good fortune. The same general request for a blessed presence is replicated on a smaller scale when a *mau*, for instance, ritually creates *nam mon* (holy water) in order to assist in the healing of someone suffering from an affliction (Textor 1973: 568-570). This protection and auspiciousness bestowed by *thep*, however, is typically and traditionally non-specific in its focus and consequences, oriented primarily towards only general and collective needs, and is perceived as the collective product of all of those various and innumerable *thep* invited to assemble. Moreover, the intercession of the *thep* is not the primary ritual goal or focus of the ceremony; summoning and supplicating the *thep*, in other words, is not perceived usually as the primary ritual technique for accessing and securing the sacral efficacy of a collective ritual event or thaumaturgic intervention on behalf of an individual.

This traditional pragmatic aloofness and peripheral ritual significance of *thep* within the daily lives of most Thais is further substantiated by Textor's observation that Thai villagers do

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polities. In this sense, status divisions among supramundane entities are reflected in status divisions among humans and their respective access and control over ritual techniques of mediation.

<sup>48</sup> Typically, this descent of the *thep*, and the benefits resulting from their presence at a ceremonial occasion, is achieved through ritual invitations in the form of supplications involving ritual offerings and the chanting – often by Buddhist monks – of specific mantras designed to honor and flatter an assembly of witnessing *thep*.



not perceive themselves as capable of receiving either specific rewards or specific punishments from the most elevated of *thep*. These entities, rather, simply fall outside of that broad pantheon of supramundane beings that villagers either directly supplicate, contractually negotiate with, or coercively manipulate when sacral assistance of some form is needed (Textor 1973: 574-575).<sup>49</sup> Due to their high rank in the pantheon of cosmological beings, it is considered more practical and useful to seek out the assistance of supramundane entities more immersed in the mundane daily affairs of the human realm.<sup>50</sup>

Consequently, given this aloofness and distance resulting from the *thep*'s august, moral purity, it is not surprising that conventionally within Thai Buddhism there seems to be no formal recognition of, or authoritative legitimacy granted to, the idea that *thep* can, or even would desire to, possess humans. The Thai ethnographic and historical record, for example, provides very few examples of any Thais claiming to be possessed by *thep* prior to the emergence of professional spirit mediums.<sup>51</sup> These assumptions about the moral distance of *thep* and their unsuitability for

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<sup>49</sup> Textor, in his exhaustive ethnography of supernatural objects in Bang Chan in the 1950s, lists those elevated Brahmanical *thep* which, due to their august presence, are not directly or individually supplicated: Phra Phrom (Brahma), Phra Isuan (Shiva), Phra Narai (Narayana, a form of Vishnu), Phra In (Indra), Phra Khrud (Garuda), Hanuman, Phra Phirun (Varuna) (Textor 1973: 574-578). What is noteworthy about this list is that in contemporary Thailand these *thep* are among those august divinities that are the most popular with the general public and thus frequently supplicated, both directly and individually. Moreover, many professional spirit mediums claim to be regularly possessed by these very same elevated Hindu deities which formerly were beyond the reach of even ritual supplication, much less possession.

<sup>50</sup> This presumption about the unequal accessibility of differing ranks of supramundane entities and the appeal of supplication to those lower in the pantheon is a seemingly common attitude according to scholars who study Theravada Buddhism across South and Southeast Asia. For example, on the appeal in Sri Lanka of the morally ambiguous deity Huniyan, see Obeyesekere 1984.

<sup>51</sup> I have only been able to find one clear reference, outside of the subculture of professional spirit mediums, which indicates that any Thais ever recognized the possibility of, or claimed, possession by *thep* (or in this case, a categorical equivalent – a *deva*). Textor briefly comments in an aside that although most regularly-possessed spirit mediums (he refers to them as “shamans”) in Bang Chan are possessed by one type of tutelary guardian spirit (*jao thi san*, in the case of Bang Chan), the possessing entity is also sometimes, “in rare instances, a *deva*” (Textor 1973: 296). In light of the fact that Textor’s work was carried out just outside Bangkok in the 1950s and that the earliest indications of something like professional spirit mediumship began to emerge first in the largest Thai urban environments primarily after World War II, Textor’s observation is perhaps not so surprising. Textor may have been observing the very beginnings of professional spirit mediumship. Finding the idea or examples of possession by a *thep* in either earlier historical eras or outside of urban areas in the 1950s and 1960s, however, would be highly unlikely, I would suspect.

possession are reinforced, as well, in the linguistic register by the fact that traditionally in the Thai language the word *thep*, or its cognates, never forms part of either those nouns that refer to spirit mediums or those verbs that refer to the act or state of spirit possession.<sup>52</sup> In addition, numerous formal Thai language definitions of key terms found in dictionaries reinforce clearly this implicit traditional assumption that *thep* do not possess humans. Thus, Bradley's 1873 dictionary defines *khon song* as "a person who worships *phi* and invites *jao phi* to enter and take up residence in himself/herself" (Bradley 1873: 99). One hundred years later, Manit's dictionary defines *khon song* in similar terms, "A person who *jao* or *phi* enter and take up residence in for whatever reason" (Manit 1976: 188), while the 1950 Siamese Royal Academy Dictionary states very clearly when defining *khao song*, "to enter and take up residence inside a person, used for *jao* and *phi*" (Siamese Royal Academy 1950: 212).

By claiming to be possessed by *thep*, therefore, professional spirit mediums profoundly overturn many apparently general and widespread principles of cosmology and ritual praxis underlying the possibilities, modes and purposes of interaction between humans and *thep* according to the existing scholarship. First, professional spirit mediums contend that not only can one directly supplicate *thep* and expect an individual answer from specific individual *thep*, but that *thep* also can, and will, descend and manifest themselves as an embodied presence in the mundane world by occupying and controlling the physical body of their chosen human medium.

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<sup>52</sup> Thus, one commonly finds references in Central Thai to *khon song* and *khon song jao* when referring to the role of spirit medium, but never *khon song thep*. Similarly, there are many different ways to refer to the act of spirit possession, all of which rely on several key verbs: *khao* (enter), *song* (to reside), and *sing* (to reside). Various formulations of the act of spirit possession include: *khao song*, *khao song jao*, *khao jao*, *khao phi*, *phi khao*, *phi sing*, *jao khao*, *jao sing*, *phi khao jao khao*, and *song jao khao phi*. However, no combinations ever, as far as I can determine, include the word *thep*, *thewada* or *deva*. All of these conclusion about terminology are based on my examination of not only the relevant ethnographic and historical literature, but also a systematic search of all the possible cognates of any Thai words that may translate as "spirit medium" or "spirit possession" in a wide range of Thai dictionaries (Thai-English and Thai-Thai) dating from both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. These dictionaries include: Pallegoix (1972 [1854]), Bradley (1873), McFarland (1960 [1944]), Royal Academy Dictionary (1950), Plang (1965), So (1965), Manit (1976), Thawisak (1987), Tianchai (1989), Wit (1993), and Wit (1994).

Consequently, one does not merely have to rely on their disembodied, collective presence at an altar anymore. Second, in the subculture of professional spirit mediumship, the supplication, descent and embodiment of *thep* as discrete, individual entities is now the primary focus and goal of regular ritual ceremonies. Third, now *thep* are not only individually and directly supplicated, but one can expect direct, dialogic communication with them as well, rather than simply having to rely on the communicative vagaries of acts of divination as was the case in the past. Fourth, the supplication and embodiment of *thep* can be utilized to resolve very specific, individual concerns and problems, and the *thep* themselves are now the principle means for solving various mundane concerns via the individually calibrated auspiciousness, protection and advice they can provide. Fifth, the auspiciousness and protection which *thep* now provide is no longer simply the aggregate consequence of an amorphous miscellany of various *thep*, but is experienced by the recipient instead as the product of certain, very specific, individual *thep*. And sixth, now anyone with a particularly troubling dilemma can choose to foster a personal relationship of relatively intense intimacy and immediacy with *thep* via the mediation of a spirit medium. And if they so choose, ordinary Thais can cultivate long-term and continuous relations of intimacy and immediacy with the *thep* via the mediation of the spirit medium. Even more astoundingly, the *thep* themselves often seek to initiate such relationships with humans by choosing certain individuals whom they want to serve as their medium among mankind.

Technically speaking, not all of the entities which possess professional spirit mediums are *thep*. Some mediums are also possessed at different times, or even exclusively, by *jao*, but the distinction between *jao* and *thep* is not always sharply drawn in the contemporary era by professional spirit mediums, by those who frequent or are familiar with them, or even by the general Thai populace as a whole. Thus, the ultimately more ambiguous and less august moral

status traditionally ascribed to *jao* has been elevated somewhat and refashioned within the overarching logic and ethos of the morally pure, non-capricious and universal benevolence and protection associated with *thep*. This same logic and ethos surrounding *thep* also informs the characterization of interactions with an eclectic assortment of more or less novel supramundane entities which have been incorporated within recent decades into the expanding pantheon of possessing *jao* and *thep*. In this sense then, this general reconceptualization of the relationship between humans and *thep* – and their mutual reliance upon each other – tends increasingly to inform and define all relationships between professional spirit mediums and their possessing spirits, regardless of the specific category, *jao* or *thep*, to which any particular possessing supramundane entity belongs.

Within these two general categories of supramundane entities which regularly possess professional spirit mediums – *jao* and *thep* – there also exists a vast and continually expanding pantheon of specific spirits and deities. In recent decades, moreover, this pantheon seems to have increased and diversified quite significantly. Consequently, professional spirit mediumship in Thailand is defined not only by its inclusion of an historically unique category of supramundane entities that now can and do possess humans, but also by the historically unique range and diversity of those entities that populate this pantheon of possessing *jao* and *thep*. More traditional spirits – such as the deceased generational elders of ancestral spirit cults and the deceased local leaders, rulers and warriors of territorial guardian spirit cults – remain to varying degrees as deified figures within the total pantheon of entities that can possess professional spirit mediums. Nonetheless, an eclectic range of new types of deities has also entered this pantheon over time, subtly and slowly altering the overall substantive character and ethos of the total pantheon of possessing spirits in the process.

Numerous scholars have proposed diverse classificatory schemes to distinguish between the different kinds of *jao* and *thep* that possess professional spirit mediums (Irvine 1982, Wijeyewardene 1986, Yagi 1988, Morris 2000, Tanabe 2002). These classificatory grids have typically proven provisional and frustrating as the scholars themselves acknowledge, primarily because Thais themselves rarely express the need or the desire to classify or group these possessing spirits very explicitly, precisely or definitively. Among Thais, after all, even the presumably significant cosmological divisions between specific *phi*, *jao*, and *thep* are hardly fixed and can appear fluid in practice and attribution.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, explicit divisions among the various types of *jao* and *thep* which possess humans are even less widely shared and agreed upon by most Thais, often because of the highly localized character of those entities within any given pantheon. Consequently, many of the heuristic etic distinctions and divisions which scholars have imposed on the wide diversity of possessing spirits and deities are so provisional precisely because they only imperfectly reflect what is, in fact, no doubt a persistently ambiguous and unsystematic emic assemblage of supramundane entities in practice within any given ethnographic setting.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> In general, no Thai would confuse *phi* with *thep*. However, the mediating category of *jao* can serve to ambiguously blunt this opposition, such that some people might “upgrade” a particular *phi* into *jao*, while others might “downgrade” a particular *thep* into a local manifestation that is referred to instead as a *jao*. In addition, the same particular supramundane entity can be classified differently by different individuals or groups reflecting the multifaceted personal, social and political dynamics underlying the performance and elaboration of cultural hierarchy, domination and subordination in differing social and institutional contexts.

<sup>54</sup> Two contrasting classificatory examples from some of the earliest work on professional spirit mediums will suffice to substantiate this point. Wijeyewardene (1986: 207) divides the possessing *jao* he discovered in Chiang Mai in the late 1970s as follows: 1) epic heroes from Thai history, 2) epic heroes from Northern Thai history, 3) legendary figures, 4) a nondescript remainder category apparently derived from by then obscure legends. In his study of the Samnak Puu Sawan movement in Bangkok, Yagi (1988: 34-36) classifies the possessing *jao* found throughout Bangkok in the mid-1980s according to their origins as follows: 1) non-human, further divided into a) *thewada* and b) *phi* (although he defines these *phi* as guardian spirits of nature, cities and households) and 2) human. *Jao* of human origins he further divides, and subdivides, into: a) religious specialists (Buddhist monks and Brahmin hermits/*ruesi*), b) heroes (kings, righteous heroes and bandits), and c) children. Yagi’s *jao* of human origins seems to reflect the threefold division of *jao pu*, *jao phau*, and *jao noi* which numerous other scholars also have identified more generally (Irvine 1982; Morris 2000).

Nevertheless, I suggest that one can posit certain generalities about the pantheon of possessing deities of professional spirit mediums as it existed up through at least the 1970s and probably into the 1980s. First, it is likely that *jao* rather than *thep* predominated, and that some of these *jao* retained strong symbolic linkages with entities that might otherwise be classified as *phi*, even though many mediums themselves denied this derivation (Irvine 1982: 336-337). In this sense, the full ideological significance of the twin ideas that mediums can be and are possessed by *thep* and that mediums are not possessed by *phi* have not always been as rhetorically prominent as currently is the case among professional spirit mediums, especially in Bangkok. Second, the social identity of many – if not most – possessing *jao* were drawn from broadly interwoven local cultural discourses concerning local and regional mythology, legends and topography (Irvine 1982: 335a; Wijeyewardene 1986: 221; Tanabe 2002: 57-58). Consequently, many of these possessing *jao* seemed to be coterminous with, if not identical to, the various very particular local tutelary guardian spirits found, for example, in the territorial guardian spirit cults of villages, cities and *mueang* (Tanabe 2002: 57-58). Both professional spirit mediumship and these tutelary spirit cults drew on a similar diverse collection of former political rulers, warriors and monks, all predominantly male, who had distinguished themselves by their noble and courageous actions on behalf of social collectivities during their lives, actions which led to their deification and apotheosis into the pantheon of supramundane entities after their deaths. Third, when drawing upon this broad stock of potential possessing *jao*, each spirit medium would identify himself or herself as the medium of various different particular *jao*. These *jao* in turn were hierarchically related to each other according to principles of age, kinship and knowledge, while the particular skills, practices and functions ascribed to each *jao* were rather diverse and flexible depending upon the idiosyncrasies of each medium's personal history.

Typically, these discrete *jao* would also be classified hierarchically by mediums according to a broad tripartite division of all spirits into three stereotypic social personalities and age sets: *jao pu* (Lord grandfather), *jao phau* (Lord Father), and *jao noi* (Little Lord).<sup>55</sup>

Beginning in the 1970s, one can discern an emerging transformation, as well as a diversifying expansion, in the character and type of supramundane entities that comprise the pantheon of possessing spirits claimed by professional spirit mediums. In the most general terms, this original pantheon of *jao* drawn from local and regional mythology was supplemented, perhaps even displaced and undermined in some locales, by supramundane entities that were more nationalist, royalist, and cosmopolitan in character.<sup>56</sup> Rather than local mythologies, these *jao* and *thep* were drawn from other mythological sources such as Thai nationalist historiography, Buddhist historiography (both Theravada and non-Theravada historiographic traditions), select non-Buddhist religious traditions such as Chinese popular religion, and even

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<sup>55</sup> Scholars describe how the *jao* of each stereotypic personality was revealed in practice through a series of broadly similar performative identities and behavioral habits, and that these spirits also sometimes displayed functional divisions of labor according to their types. Thus, according to Irvine (1982: 330-334), *jao pu* were elderly and wise masters of magical knowledge who occupied a position of senior teacher and only possessed individuals on important occasions. *Jao phau* were vigorous, active men in their prime, while *jao noi* were either shy, unassertive children or mischievous, rambunctious, amusing adolescents. Behavior, attire, demeanor, language and conversational styles of the *jao* during possession matched each stereotypic personality type. Wijeyewardene, also studying spirit mediums in Chiang Mai around the same time as Irvine, describes (1986: 222) a slightly different classificatory scheme composed of *jao phau*, *jao phi* (lord elder brother), and *jao noi*, and argues, contra Irvine, that there was a clear functional division of labor between the three types of spirits regarding teaching, divination and healing, respectively.

<sup>56</sup> Tanabe, carrying out research in Chiang Mai in the 1980s, notes (2002: 57) this same shift and expansion in the types of deities that make up the pantheon of possessing spirits within that city's reconstructed tradition of professional spirit mediumship. He explicitly argues that the "traditional pantheon of tutelary spirits has been gradually undermined by Bangkok-based deities since around the 1970s" (2002: 57). Morris (2000), who carried out research in the early 1990s, however, argues that discourses of locality and regional identity remain crucial to the cultural meaning and social significance of professional spirit mediums in Chiang Mai. Her work highlights the prominence of these local *jao* in the Chiang Mai spirit medium community, and she seems to indicate that non-local deities, such as Hindu gods and Bangkok royalty, occupy a more peripheral and ambiguous status within the community of spirit mediums. I suspect that the degree to which *jao* drawn from local and regional mythology have been displaced, supplemented or undermined, either in principle or in practice, by more nationalist, royalist and cosmopolitan deities is a very context-sensitive social process which has played out rather unevenly across the geographic terrain of Thailand. A comparative analysis of changes in local and regional spirit medium pantheons – not to mention traditions of spirit mediumship, professional and otherwise – has yet to be written, however, due to a simple lack of adequate comparative data, both historical and ethnographic.

various foreign cultural histories. All of these sources provided a rich repertoire of sacrally potent figures capable of miraculous interventions which professional spirit mediums could selectively drawn upon to explain and legitimate their experiences of possession.<sup>57</sup>

At one level, this eclectic supplementing of the Thai pantheon of deities who possess humans can be interpreted as a reflection of the fundamentally polytropic character of Thai popular religiosity. Nonetheless, it is also clear that this elaboration in cosmology and sacrality has not been a uniform sociocultural development across Thailand. Although such appropriations were apparently more modest and restrained upcountry where local cosmologies often retained their strong hold and appeal, in the central region – and around Bangkok in particular – these alternative “lineages” of possessing spirits seem to have become quite prominent. Consequently, by the mid-1990s when I carried out my fieldwork in Bangkok, these more recently expansive new lineages of *jao* and *thep* were well represented within the Bangkok subculture of professional spirit mediums. No doubt this development was due in part to the fact that in Bangkok local mythology is very much coterminous with Thai national and royalist historiography, and therefore there was less of a sense of displacement and supplementation when these new figures in the pantheon appeared on the scene. Moreover, as the largest urban environment in Thailand, Bangkok is home to a flourishing diversity of ethnic, regional, national

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<sup>57</sup> Pranee (2002) describes a recent ceremony in Prachinburi among the Phuan which is highly suggestive of how more nationalist, royalist and cosmopolitan *jao* and *thep* supplement and displace local mythological entities. She describes an annual *liang phi pu ta* (feeding of the village/ancestral spirit) ceremony. During this ceremony, however, the *cham* (ritual intermediary) has been displaced, both in terms of the organization and the practice of the annual rite. Even more significantly, however, although the *phi pu ta* are invited down to manifest themselves through possession during the middle segment of the ceremony, they do not possess a local *tian* as was the case thirty years ago when Tambiah studied these types of cults in the Northeast. Instead, the *phi pu ta* arrive and voice their concerns by possessing four different spirit mediums who appear to be professional spirit mediums and who are identified as the mediums of the King of Vientiane’s daughter (Mae Kaew Nang Kwak), a Chinese god (no name given), a Lamphun historical hero (Khun Han), and another spirit from Vientiane in Laos (Jao Phau Xieng Kan). This ceremony of mediumship appears, according to the brief description provided, to consist of an unusual blending of practices and roles associated with both traditional ancestral spirit cults and professional spirit mediumship, with professional spirit mediums and the more supra-local deities who possess them displacing traditional spirit mediums and serving now as the point of access to local ancestral spirits.



and religious communities and their various cultural traditions, and this diversity inevitably helps to fuel the agglomerative tendencies of Thai popular religiosity, including cosmopolitan elaborations upon the pantheon of supramundane entities at play within mainstream popular religion. In addition, Bangkok more than any other locale in Thailand is deeply and intimately embedded within a wide range of international cultural flows via migration, transportation and communication technologies, making it both more receptive to, and frequently the first stop of, many novel transnational and cosmopolitan cultural influences, imagery and representations.<sup>58</sup>

In the 1990s, this expanded pantheon in the Bangkok metropolitan area mirrored in a more elaborate, expansive and detailed fashion that mix of traditional and unusual new deities that other scholars had begun observing in cities like Chiang Mai in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Irvine 1982: 339-341; Tanabe 2002: 57-58), although these new nationalist, royalist and cosmopolitan deities were increasingly more prominent and dominant within the total pantheon of possessing spirits found within Bangkok in the 1990s. Because of the enormous number and variety of possessing *jao* and *thep* within the Bangkok region, it is impossible to list or categorize all of the spirits, both old and new, within the expanded pantheon.

Nonetheless, one can identify clearly certain new types of “lineages” that are now prominently represented among Bangkok professional spirit mediums. First, there are the deified royalist figures drawn from Thai national history such as King Nareswan, King Ramkhamhaeng, King Taksin, King Chulalongkorn, Krom Luang Chumphon Khet Udomsak, and Somdet Phra Nang Jao Sunanthakumarirat. Second, the pantheon of possessing spirits also now includes a diverse range of gods derived from Hindu and Buddhist mythology, such as Siva, Brahma,

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<sup>58</sup> Some professional spirit mediums I knew, for instance, would talk about Tibetan Buddhist deities or iconography, yet most of their Bangkok followers could only vaguely appreciate what they were referring to and why it might be important. Likewise, one spirit medium of the Mahayana bodhisattva Jao Mae Kuan Im once complained during a trip outside of Bangkok that rural Thai Buddhists were too narrow-minded and too lacking in education to appreciate that Kuan Im was actually a Buddhist deity, even if derived from a non-Theravada Buddhist tradition.

Vishnu, Indra, Ganesh, Laksmi, Umathewi, Parvati, and Durga. Third, the pantheon has now expanded to include Chinese Mahayana Buddhist bodhisattvas such as Kuan Im as well as a variety of other deities drawn from Chinese mythology, such as Aa Kong, Kim Bo Nia, Aa Nia, Siang Chai Ia Kong, and Nam Tao Chae Kung. Fourth, the pantheon now also prominently includes various spirits of highly accomplished Buddhist and non-Buddhist religious virtuosos. Thus, some mediums claim to be possessed by the spirits of Buddhist monks considered to be arahants, including both famous monks from recent Thai history like Luang Puu To and more mythological monks like Mogalana, a disciple of the historical Buddha. In addition, Brahmanical hermits in the form of *ruesi* are also perceived to regularly possess professional spirit mediums, with certain *ruesi* becoming especially popular such as Ruesi Naroad, Ruesi Phau Kae (Old Father Hermit), and Ruesi Ta Fai (Lightning Eye Hermit).<sup>59</sup>

This expansion and diversification of the pantheon of possessing spirits available to professional spirit mediums reflects the fact that even those *thep* in the highest reaches of the Thai cosmology are now considered capable of and willing to possess humans. Many of the specific contours of this modern expansion in the pantheon of possessing spirits, moreover, is not surprising given the diversity of entities to which the label *thep* (or *thewada* or *deva*) can apply. This label applies to a wider range of supramundane beings of high moral standards, including Hindu deities, kings and members of the royal family, Buddhist monks who have achieved liberation from samsara, and the spirits of any human reborn into the heavenly realms by virtue of their past accumulated Buddhist merit (van Esterik 1982: 8). The expansion in the contemporary pantheon of possessing spirits, thus, represents in part the logical outcome of

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<sup>59</sup> Tanabe (Tanabe 2002: 57-58) notes that Chiang Mai professional spirit mediums also claimed to be possessed by other more eclectic types of deities such as spirits found among upland minority groups, Saudi Arabian deities and even Hong Kong kungfu masters. I found nothing like these claims in Bangkok, although I would not argue for the impossibility of such unusual claims, given the sheer size and diversity of the Bangkok subculture of professional spirit mediums.

perceiving all *thep* as potential possessing spirits, regardless of the heights of their moral elevation and propriety. It also represents a full willingness to perceive all supramundane entities of a sacrally potent nature, including *jao* and *ruesi*, in a manner similar to morally upright and benevolent *thep*.<sup>60</sup>

These various new “lineages” of *jao* and especially *thep* which possess contemporary spirit mediums in the 1990s, however, are not historical unprecedented, even outside of Bangkok. Scholars studying professional spirit mediums in Chiang Mai in the 1970s, for instance, also found a few individuals who claimed to be possessed by King Chulalongkorn, Kuan Im, Krishna or Mogalana. But all of these scholars also pointed out that these claims were atypical, and they suggested that these claims were treated by most people at that time as unusual and eccentric, perhaps even a sign of excessive self-aggrandizement (Irvine 1982: 339-342; Wijeyewardene 1986: 169, 221; Tanabe 2002: 57-58). Although a lack of data means that we cannot know if such claims also were seen as equally unusual, eccentric or bold in Bangkok in the 1970s and 1980s, Yagi’s observation that a spirit medium cult centered on King Chulalongkorn had become quite large and prominent in Bangkok by the early 1980s indicates

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<sup>60</sup> One of the seeming classificatory commonalities across all of these various types of possessing spirits, both old and new, is that all of them share a common designatory particle in the Thai language – *ong*. These linguistic particles are used to mark number when discussing classes of objects in the Thai language. Thus, the designatory particle for *phi* is “*ton*” while for normal humans the particle is *khon*. However, a special particle, *ong*, is used with a sacrally-revered class of objects that includes kings, high-ranking princes, monks, Buddha statues, *thep*, *jao*, and *ruesi*. Kirsch defines *ong* as designating “the class of objects counted as ‘mana-filled object’” (Kirsch 1975: 184). One could, therefore, also view the modern expansion of the pantheon of possessing spirits as reflecting a willingness on the part of professional spirit mediums to view humans as capable of being possessed by all types of sacrally potent, “mana-filled objects” regardless of the extent of any entities moral grandeur, and no longer restricting themselves to just certain types of “mana-filled objects.” This interpretation is supported by the linguistic fact that in the contemporary period Thais active in the subculture of professional spirit mediums typically refer to the fact that they have a propensity towards possession or are in a state of possession by stating simply “*mi ong*” (literally, “[I] have an *ong*”). The idea of *ong* also seems to delimit, in part, the ideological and cosmological boundaries of who can become possessed within the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums. Commentary within the subculture suggests that neither kings nor monks can become possessed by *jao* or *thep*. In other words, *ong*-infused supramundane entities cannot possess or displace the consciousness or agency of *ong*-infused human beings. Empirical reality is more complicated, however. Within the subculture I heard stories about monks who intermittently or regularly became possessed, and on one occasion – at a public *wai khru* ceremony – I personally observed monks both behaving as if in a state of possession and being treated by individuals as if they were possessed by *thep*.

that it may not have been that unusual after all in the capital (Yagi 1988: 46-47). By the mid-1990s during my fieldwork, however, these new “lineages” of *jao* and *thep* were certainly no longer seen as unusual or exceptional, much less supplemental. In reality, they seemed as prominent, if not more prominent, than those more traditional deified figures drawn from various more local mythologies, such as the generic Jao Phau Lak Muang (Lord Father of the City Pillar) or the Northern Thai Princess Camdewi.

In many ways, moreover, the professional spirit mediums of, for example, Royal Father King Chulalongkorn (*Sadet Phau Ro Ha*), Lord Mother Kuan Im (*Jao Mae Kuan Im*), and Royal Father Siva (*Sadet Pauo Isuan* or *Siwa*) were very much the norm. This social reality is reflected in the fact that in Bangkok in the 1990s I rarely if ever heard the tripartite categories of *jao pu*, *jao phau*, and *jao noi* employed to categorize possessing deities. Instead, those individuals active in the subculture of professional spirit mediums and those writers in the popular press reporting on this subculture would more frequently use a different tripartite division. When I would ask mediums or their followers to classify possessing deities, they would frequently speak instead of three “lineages” or “streams” (*sai*): *thai* (Thai), *jin* (Chinese), and *khaek* (Indian). These same three categories were also frequently used to characterize a wide range of objects or activities associated with professional spirit mediums: the special attire they wore during possession, the ritual objects and charms they used or produced during therapeutic sessions, the styles of chanting, singing and music performed or played during ceremonial events, the specific types of ritual practices and ceremonial forms used in annual *wai khru* ceremonies, and even the styles of iconography embodied in the many statues and decorative elements which mediums acquired and proudly displayed to the public.

In many ways, *thai*, *jin* and *khaek* functioned within the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums as signifiers for three discrete but powerful sources of sacral power and modes of religiosity, all of which were put ultimately at the service of Buddhist wisdom and Buddhist benevolence, Buddhist values and Buddhist goals. Less markers of ethnic identity or national origin, they seemed instead to point to civilizational regimes of supramundane cosmological and ritual efficaciousness. And in the process, this tripartite division functioned within the subculture as a dominant contemporary emic framework for organizing and reflecting on the diverse sources of its claims to religious authenticity and authority. *Thai*, *jin* and *khaek* also functioned as a framework for organizing and reflecting on possible combinations and syntheses, for these three “lineages” constantly flowed together and intermingled in the daily lives of most mediums.

Many mediums, for example, were possessed by a personally idiosyncratic blend of deities from two or more of these three “lineages.” Moreover, this same hybrid eclecticism of simultaneously drawing on each “lineage” in a personally meaningful fashion informed the mundane social space and daily practices of professional spirit mediums in general: in the diversity of statues assembled on their private altars, in the decorative motifs adorning their homes, in the various types of ritual services and sanctified paraphernalia they provided to clients, in the sacralized objects employed to deliver therapeutic services, in the mix of ceremonial forms deployed in their annual ceremonies praising their possessing *jao* and *thep*, and in the very diverse musical and liturgical forms which aesthetically framed their public ceremonial and private confessional lives. For Bangkok professional spirit mediums, then, *thai*, *jin* and *khaek* constituted three discrete but interwoven refractions of a common religiosity, and

together they constituted a template of ultimately unified multiplicity which was experienced in daily life as simultaneously cosmological, moral, practical, ritual and aesthetic in nature.<sup>61</sup>

It is worth noting as well that Chulalongkorn, Kuan Im and Siva – those possessing spirits that are arguably the pre-eminent representatives of the *thai*, *jin* and *khaek* “lineages” within the late twentieth century pantheon of Bangkok professional spirit mediums – are also considered to be supramundane entities of unquestionable moral purity, universal benevolence, and efficacious sacral power. Siva and all of the Hindu deities, after all, have been categorized for centuries as morally refined and powerful *thewada* within the pantheon of Thai Theravada Buddhism. The purity, benevolence and power of Kuan Im as a Buddhist bodhisattva characterized by incomparable compassion and sacrifice is similarly clear-cut, as is the attribution of identical traits to Chulalongkorn who is perceived to have displayed these qualities throughout his life and rule.<sup>62</sup> All represent the deification of humans who have accumulated vast amounts of Buddhist merit over countless lifetimes of moral discipline and practice.

In all of these ways, therefore, each of these three supramundane entities is an exemplary representative of the moral virtue and unambiguous benevolence associated with *thep* as identified by scholars of Thai Buddhism, for within this worldview “*thewada* are conceived of as moral, dependable, benevolent, and powerful creatures worthy of honor and respect because of

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<sup>61</sup> As an emic template within the subculture for organizing and reflecting on religious diversity, *thai*, *jin*, and *khaek*, in many ways, displaces the more traditional modern era tripartite model of animism, Brahmanism and Buddhism used by many educated Thais to organize their perception of discrete cultural and historical formations of religious diversity that have been synthetically fused within Thai Buddhism over the centuries of accommodation and localization. This choice by professional spirit mediums is perhaps not surprising given that they a) seek to radically dissociate themselves from *phi* and the malevolent capriciousness or moral ambiguity associated with those things labeled traditionally as animistic, and b) assert that their religious role and activities are unambiguously Buddhist in character and ethos.

<sup>62</sup> As a Theravada Buddhist monarch, Chulalongkorn is also believed to embody the ten moral perfections, or paramitas (*barami* in Thai), characteristic of all monarchs, perfections that are also shared by bodhisattvas. Thus, Chulalongkorn, like all world-conquering monarchs and protectors of the Buddhist teachings and Sangha, is traditionally perceived to be a bodhisattva who has only managed to achieve his current status and role due to the incomparable acts of merit performed in previous lives. See Stengs (1999) for more details.

their merit accumulated in past lives” (van Esterik 1982: 8). Consequently, these supramundane beings are defined, and referred to, as *thep*. As a result, they both exemplify and powerfully reinforce the more general tendency within the contemporary subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums to employ in a general sense the ideology and rhetoric of *thep*, and its emphasis upon an undeniably benevolent morality, wisdom and efficacy, with regards to all types of possessing spirits, regardless of whether they are formally *jao* or *thep*, regardless of what type or “lineage” they belong to. Thus, it is common to encounter all variety of professional spirit mediums who employ, sometimes unconsciously and implicitly, the rhetoric and ideology of *thep* both when characterizing their own charismatic authority and legitimacy or when justifying the appropriate style of social interaction which should be observed between clients, mediums and those supramundane entities which possess them.

It is clear, consequently, that the categories and types of possessing spirits within the general pantheon drawn upon by professional spirit mediums have expanded dramatically in the past thirty years. Yet how exactly has the inclusion of this wider variety of *jao* and *thep* transformed the experience and practice of spirit possession and spirit mediumship in Thailand as a contemporary social and cultural phenomenon?<sup>63</sup> First, it has infused a distinctly Buddhist rhetoric of universalized benevolence, compassion and virtue into the morality and ethos of spirit mediumship. Previously, *phi* and *jao* possessed individuals and struck them down with afflictions primarily because humans had somehow offended them or had neglected to respect the normative prohibitions of collective social life. In their behavior, malevolent *phi* displayed amoral unpredictability, while ancestral and guardian tutelary spirits displayed an ambiguous morality of punishment and protection. The contemporary *jao* and *thep* of professional spirit

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<sup>63</sup> Muecke (1992: 98) very briefly comments on a similar set of issues when discussing the significance of the difference between possession by *phi* and *thewada* among those spirit mediums in Chiang Mai she was familiar with in the 1970s.

mediums, however, are perceived as dependable, predictable and morally virtuous. They intervene in the lives of any and all individuals out of a compassionate concern to save them from mundane suffering, not because someone has annoyed them, shown them disrespect or violated certain ethical prohibitions. By extension, therefore, the actions and identities of professional spirit mediums are also informed by this sensibility of virtue, benevolence and wisdom which they publicly enact when they are in a state of possession.

Second, the dominating presence of this new class and type of possessing spirits has expanded the character of the social-cum-moral horizon of action within which possessing spirits, and their spirit mediums, are believed to be embedded and over which they have definitive authority. Traditionally, ancestral and guardian tutelary spirits exercised dominion over social action within discrete, and even relatively restricted, bounded domains, and these domains usually were identified exclusively with the current members of either particular, bounded geographic locales or social communities of a territorial or kinship nature. Although some guardian spirits exerted dominion over relatively expansive territorial regions including supra-village collectivities and regions, most were more narrowly identified with the deified local leaders and warriors of particular villages and cities. The pantheon of contemporary professional spirit mediums, however, now includes national monarchs and royalty, Buddhist bodhisattvas and arahants, and Hindu and Chinese gods. The boundaries of social action and communal membership these supramundane entities exert dominion over is enormously expanded by comparison, extending to at least all members of the Thai nation and even humanity in general. In this sense, therefore, their authority and dominion is relatively unbounded by comparison with previous forms of spirit mediumship, because it is no longer tied to a particular, more narrowly bounded locale or horizon of sociality. Consequently, these more supralocal or



universalistic supramundane entities, and by extension the professional spirit mediums that serve them, are accessible, appealing and powerful to any client, follower or devotee anywhere within the nation, regardless of his or her local social identities. Moreover, as *thep* these supramundane entities – and their mediums – can intervene in a wider set of mundane dilemmas regarding individual fate, chance and karma and at a more determinate level of causality than those *jao* and *phi* lower in the pantheon who possess mediums associated with ancestral and guardian spirit cults.

Third, this expanded domain of moral authority and responsibility among the new types of possessing spirits within the pantheon has also transformed among professional spirit mediums the forms of their attachment to social space. Within ancestral and guardian spirit cults, the lordly spirits capable of protection and punishment were defined by their attachment to either particular social collectivities and/or particular spatial locales, and this attachment was spatially mediated and socially embedded within these particular collectivities or locales through a relatively permanent physical public shrine (*san*). As such, the communal practices of the spirit mediums within these cults were likewise centered around these shrines. Given the more expansively unbounded domains of moral responsibility associated with *thep*, however, the attachment of these possessing spirits to a much broadened horizon of sociality is thematized not through attachment to a permanent public shrine so much as attachment to a diversity of specific individuals who serve as their representatives. Consequently, professional spirit mediums primarily engage with their clientele, the suffering members of humanity and a national community, not at a public *san* but in the more public spaces within their private homes. These private homes, in turn, have been transformed into what professional spirit mediums most typically call a *tamnak*, a term which translates as “the house, residence or abode of royalty”

(Wit 1993: 533). These connotations of royalty and high status clearly befits, and evokes, the moral elevation and prestige of *thep* while also simultaneously signifying the relatively private and mobile nature of the embeddedness of the *thep* within a social community. Rather than a permanent public shrine, professional spirit mediums instead establish *tamnak*, which subsequently move with them whenever they physically relocate their homes within a city, a province, a region or even a country.

Finally, generally speaking, the social character and personality of *jao* and *thep* within the professional spirit medium's pantheon of possessing spirits are more sharply thematized and experienced as individual entities with distinct histories and personalities than is the case with other forms of indigenous Thai spirit mediumship. This characteristic is particularly evident when compared with the ancestral spirits which do not manifest themselves as specific individual ancestors known by name when they possess their spirit medium within ancestral spirit cults (Turton 1972, Irvine 1982, Wijeyewardene and Cohen 1984). Instead, in these cases they take on a much more stereotypic personality as a generalized kin elder whose specific individual identity is irrelevant to the matter at hand. Many guardian spirits have more sharply etched individual personalities, which is not surprising because they are conceptualized often as the deification of particular past local notables. And yet even with guardian spirits more stereotypic social identities can come to the fore, while some guardian spirits for towns and cities are actually constituted out of an amalgamation of numerous distinct individual spirits which are bound together in an aggregated form through special rites. Although the performative behavior and identity of those various types of *jao* and *thep* which possess professional spirit mediums can become stereotypic at times, there is nonetheless a clear sense that these mediums are possessed by named, individual supramundane entities with their own distinctive biographies and histories,

mythic or otherwise. For long-term clients and followers, moreover, the performative elaboration and deepening of this very individual personality constitutes much of the pleasure and intimacy derived from regular interaction with *jao* and *thep* (Grow 2002; Tanabe 2013), a social dynamic which appears to be absent from spirit mediumship within ancestral and guardian spirit cults.

*Changes in the relationship between spirit possession, spirit mediumship and Buddhism.*

As described within the existing ethnographic literature, conventionally spirit possession and spirit mediumship is a marginal and subordinate form of religious experience and practice which is accorded only a relatively modest degree of religious authority and legitimacy. Although tolerated by Buddhist monks and ascribed a legitimate, but peripheral, role in the overall Buddhist cosmological order of supramundane beings, ritual praxis and worldly ends, spirit possession and spirit mediumship is typically seen as limited to range of mundane, worldly problems – primarily, select types of individual illness or affliction and dilemmas of communal prosperity and protection. And even in these restricted domains, spirit possession and spirit mediumship are often just one option within a broader potential range of both meaningful explanations and thaumaturgic interventions. Other meaningful explanations for worldly dilemmas include karma, fate, luck and sorcery, while other thaumaturgic options include the transformative potency of the esoteric knowledge possessed by empowered teachers (*mau*) and the sacral potency of the Buddha's liberatory teachings mediated by virtuous monks (*phra*).

Given the explicitly negative evaluation of possession by malevolent *phi* requiring exorcism and the marginal and subordinate status of those forms of spirit mediumship associated with ancestral and guardian spirit cults, it is not surprising that Buddhist monks are represented in the academic literature as traditionally maintaining a respectful distance from the experience and practice of spirit possession and spirit mediumship. This social and symbolic distance in

opinion and practice is reinforced by what many scholars describe as an ideologically polarized opposition between spirits, possession and mediums and the Buddhist teachings, soteriological liberation and monks.<sup>64</sup> Thus, although monks may diagnose cases of spirit possession and choose to either exorcise those spirits or send the afflicted individual to existing spirit mediums for treatment, traditionally monks are not involved directly in any way in the planning or performance of those central ritual practices which are most defining of spirit mediums: their sessions of therapeutic treatment, their public ceremonies in the service of communal prosperity, or their annual festivals in which they feast, honor, celebrate and entertain their possessing spirits.<sup>65</sup> Likewise, although conventionally spirit mediums pay nominal respect and devotion to Buddhism at the beginning of all their ceremonies as is typical of all types of non-monastic ritual practitioners, they are not described as participating as possessed spirit mediums – or even as non-possessed laity primarily identified by their social role as a spirit medium – in any of those numerous ritual practices of merit-making which are most defining, for both monks and laity, of Buddhist moral identity: alms collection, the ordination of new monks, the making of merit and extension of protective blessings on innumerable occasions such as funerals, house convocations, or annual festivals celebrating the life of the Buddha. Traditionally then, there would seem to be an almost total distanced opposition between Buddhism and spirit possession, and this distanced

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<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Kirsch (1967), Tambiah (1970), Irvine (1982), Wijeyewardene (1986), Muecke (1992), Yukio (2003), Guelden (2007). For schematic modeling of this opposition, see Kirsch (1977: 260) and Tambiah (1970: 338). Some of the most common markers of this distance is the reluctance and even prohibition of possession occurring within monasteries and the common belief among spirit mediums that their deities will not descend to possess them on monthly days of intensified Buddhist devotion such as *wan phra*. Phra Thienwit (2006) is a contemporary statement of this same belief made by a monk who studied the beliefs and practices of professional spirit mediums in Bangkok. This structured and systematic normative and behavioral distance has been noted in other Theravada Buddhist societies as well, such as Burma (Spiro 1967; Brac de la Perriere 2009; Brac de la Perriere 2011) and Laos (Holt 2009). Gombrich (1997) advances this argument as a general statement for Buddhism as a whole.

<sup>65</sup> These generalizations are based on a close reading of the most detailed ethnographic treatments of possession and spirit mediums in the context of ancestral and guardian spirit cults: Kirsch (1967), Tambiah (1970), Irvine (1982), Tanabe (1991).

opposition extends throughout all domains such as cosmology and ideology, ritual practice and modes of transcendence, religious roles and social relations, and religious goals and devotional experience.<sup>66</sup>

In the context of contemporary professional spirit mediumship, however, this distance across all of these dimensions between Buddhism and Buddhist monks and spirit possession and spirit mediums has narrowed considerably. Nonetheless, most of this narrowing of distance has been asymmetrical in character. It has primarily consisted of professional spirit mediums reframing spirit possession and the goals and practices of spirit mediumship within a more explicit, if conventional, Buddhist frame of reference, meaning and significance. Simultaneously, professional spirit mediums have also sought whenever possible to establish pragmatic linkages of social alliance with individually receptive Buddhist monks and temples in the support of broadly shared normative Buddhist goals and social projects. Nonetheless, neither the Buddhist Sangha as a collective institution nor most Buddhist monks as individuals have significantly refashioned their ideological, social or ritual relations with regards to spirit possession or spirit mediums. Nonetheless, certain monks have formed close, even if ultimately ambivalent and typically short-term, relations of alliance and support with certain professional spirit mediums in the pursuit of commonly shared goals. And an even smaller number of monks have gone further

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<sup>66</sup> This distance is never total or absolute, however. Because spirit mediums also occupy the role of layperson, they frequently interact with Buddhist monks as laity in all of the ways that any other layperson would regarding, for instance, the making of merit. The ethnographic literature typically portrays Buddhist monks as having a complex social and symbolic relationship of alternately opposition, complementarity or segregated integration with spirit cults and their defining public and/or private rituals (see Tambiah 1970 for a fuller elaboration and analysis). The precise analytic contours of the relationship between Buddhist monks and the spirit mediums of ancestral or guardian spirit cults is difficult to decipher clearly, however, because the ethnographic literature contains few comprehensive and detailed descriptions of those central ritual events, private or public, in these cults within which spirit mediums play a central role. The most detailed descriptions, however, indicate the absence or extreme marginality of Buddhist monks within these events. See Kirsch (1967), Tambiah (1970), Irvine (1982), Tanabe (1991).

and, for example, are now actively involved as important participants within some of the central annual ceremonial events organized by Bangkok professional spirit mediums.<sup>67</sup>

The ability of contemporary professional spirit mediums to not only claim that they are devout and virtuous Buddhists but also to assert, against conventional traditional common sense, that their experience of spirit possession actually is a confirmation of this fact is substantially aided by their claim that they are possessed by *thep* and other august and virtuous deities within the Buddhist cosmological pantheon. In the classical cosmological scheme, *thep* pay homage to the Buddha and receive instruction from him regarding Buddhist thought and practice. Moreover, *thep* are traditionally perceived as protectors of Buddhism and the Buddhist Sangha. The professional spirit mediums I met during my fieldwork, consequently, continually explained that the spirits that possessed them descended from the upper reaches of the cosmological heavens and took possession of them in order to serve humanity, to support Buddhism, and to alleviate the suffering of humanity. They achieved this goal through the use of their profoundly efficacious supramundane powers (*itthirit*) to create life-saving miracles (*pathihan*) in the lives of clients and followers. Their universal and non-discriminatory compassion and benevolence was presented as a natural reflection of their vast personal store of merit and virtue (*bun barami*) earned over countless lifetimes. At the same time, helping mankind by alleviating its suffering and protecting it from various dangers was also a way for these august supramundane entities to make even more merit (*tham bun*), a core goal and practice of all proper Buddhists. In this manner then, the experience of spirit possession and the successful practice of therapy and

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<sup>67</sup> All of the scholars studying contemporary professional spirit mediums have noted this strong association with Buddhism and explicit appeal by mediums to Buddhist ideology, symbolism, idioms and practices for the purpose of improving their legitimacy and authority (Irvine 1982: 342-345, Wijeyewardene 1986: 160-171; Yagi 1988: 30; Muecke 1992; Tanabe 2002: 55-56; Pattana 1999: 163; Morris 2000). However, few have commented on the social alliances and relations forged between professional spirit mediums and Buddhist monks or temples. None have analyzed the patterned asymmetrical character of the narrowing of social and cultural distance between possession and Buddhism, mediums and monks.

thaumaturgy was ideologically reconceptualized within the subculture of professional spirit mediums as not only a consequence of a vast store of Buddhist merit and virtue, but a fundamental means by which to increase further one's Buddhist merit and virtue as well – for both the possessing spirits and their human hosts.

This explicitly Buddhist frame of reference, meaning and significance has fully displaced more traditional explanations concerning both why spirits possessed individuals and why their thaumaturgic interventions were efficacious. Professional spirit mediums in Bangkok were much less likely to explain their onset of possession as the result of a gendered constitutional vulnerability such as a “weak heart” (*jai aun*), the violation of particular communal moral taboos, or the idiosyncratic choice of a possessing spirit. Rather, they constantly repeated that *thep* would only choose as a medium those humans who themselves were morally pure and devout, who themselves already had a considerable store of Buddhist merit and virtue built up over many lifetimes. Furthermore, the thaumaturgic efficaciousness of professional spirit mediums did not reside in their ability to serve primarily as avenues of communication with possessing *phi* and *jao* who would then explain what types of offerings, supplication and moral practice were necessary to overcome the afflictions of a spirit attack or to avoid an impending danger. Rather, their supramundane efficacy was rooted instead in the morally pure and potent power and sacrality (*itthirit*) of the *thep* which possessed them, a power and sacrality which was itself a manifestation of that *thep*'s immense store of Buddhist charisma, merit and virtue (*bun barami*).<sup>68</sup>

These Buddhist interpretations and idioms, in turn, extended into the rhetoric Bangkok professional spirit mediums employed frequently to talk about their own daily actions and goals,

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<sup>68</sup> This connection was rendered explicit by the fact that another term for referring to this potent supramundane power was *apinihan*, which literally translates as “the power of *barami*, the power of *bun* which is stored up” (Manit 1986: 1074).

as well as the advice that they passed on to clients and followers regarding how they should improve and morally uplift their lives. Bangkok professional spirit mediums continually endorsed a version of moderate asceticism which more broadly defines the religious lifestyle of especially devout Buddhist laity in late-twentieth-century Thailand (Stengs 2002). Thus, for example, professional spirit mediums frequently made reference, either directly or indirectly, to both examples of this moderate asceticism in their own lives, the difficulty of following the demands of this moderate ascetic lifestyle, and the need to intensify or redouble efforts in this mild asceticism. The edifying and purifying signs and practices of this moderate asceticism included vegetarianism, abstinence from alcohol or other intoxicants, meditation, and a variety of other various forms of material and psychological sacrifice. In addition, strictly following the basic five moral precepts of Buddhist laity (or even more precepts on important occasions), frequently chanting scriptures and prayers, and regular acts of self-sacrifice and merit-making via material donations and offerings to monks and those in need were endorsed continually as a necessary ideal when describing the proper moral life of a professional spirit medium. Not surprisingly then, often some combination or extension of these foundational practices of individual moral cultivation in an explicitly Buddhist vein were rhetorically employed by mediums whenever they praised or criticized the behavior or example of other professional spirit mediums that they knew.

Although mediums provided clients with more immediate thaumaturgic interventions founded upon esoteric knowledges and techniques typically seen – at times – as at best only provisionally or marginally Buddhist in character, they nonetheless also consistently framed and reframed the personal mundane dilemmas of their clients in terms of conventional Buddhist interpretations of karma, merit and properly devout Buddhist moral cultivation and practice. As



such, they continually endorsed and provided basic instruction to their clients in that moderately ascetic lifestyle of modern bourgeois lay devotionism that they themselves claimed to struggle to emulate and achieve as well. Moreover, they also regularly invited clients to participate in a series of conventional Buddhist merit-making activities which they and their entourage of followers were also organizing as devout followers themselves – the donation of money and goods to Buddhist temples via either *kathin* (end of Lent) or *thaut pha pa* (forest robe donation) rituals, large scale projects of restoring Buddhist temples or building Buddhist statues, philanthropic donations to organizations carrying out general social welfare among the needy, and pilgrimages to famous (or not-so famous) Buddhist sacred sites either within Thailand or beyond.<sup>69</sup>

In all of these ways, therefore, very long-standing and conventional Thai Buddhist values, beliefs and goals both contextually frame and are pragmatically woven into the daily lives and practices of professional spirit mediums, their followers and their clients. And especially through these mundane acts of merit-making, professional spirit mediums concretely and undeniably insert themselves into the wider ritual economy of utterly normative, conventional and legitimate forms of public religiosity and social action which confirm socially and culturally any Thai individual's devotion and moral virtue as authentically Buddhist. Particularly important in this regard are the idioms of social and financial support for the Buddhist Sangha and the performative display and exemplification of normative Buddhist social and ethical values. Moreover, acts of merit-making which require some degree of coordination with Buddhist temples – such as *thaut pha pa* ceremonies, *kathin* ceremonies, and the restoration

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<sup>69</sup> Wijeyewardene (1986: 163) observes quite accurately this same general idiom, mood and emphasis among spirit mediums in Chiang Mai in the late 1970s: “mediums, in possession and out, return over and over to the theme of making merit, of the possessing spirit expiating his bad karma by healing and helping humans, and by giving alms to monks and monasteries, organizing preaching, and construction of Buddha images.”

of temples buildings or the raising of Buddhist statues – also serve as a common and pragmatic basis upon which professional spirit mediums form temporary alliances with monks and abbots. And these social relations of mutual reciprocity, need and recognition, in turn, can easily be interpreted and portrayed by professional spirit mediums as a public statement of personal recognition and legitimacy which has been bestowed upon them by monks, the most definitive representatives and exemplars of proper, orthodox Buddhism within the modern Thai kingdom.

In this manner, professional spirit mediums rhetorically play upon and conflate their dual identity as spirit medium and devout layperson. They understand themselves naturally as both, and they regularly performatively enact and comment upon these dual roles and identities in both public and private settings within the subculture. Thus within the subculture, they present themselves as devout (lay) Buddhists who are virtuous practitioners, wealthy patrons, resolute defenders and important supporters of Thai Theravada Buddhist institutions, and the general social goals and ethics underlying these institutions. In addition, they make it perfectly clear to everyone that their ability to so effectively fill the role of a devout (lay) Buddhist patron is dependent upon the material and financial prosperity which has accompanied their success in fulfilling their role as a professional spirit medium, a role which is itself dependent upon their prior exemplary store of merit and charismatic virtue (*bun barami*). Although they may contextually downplay their status as professional spirit mediums in their interactions with Buddhist monks and temples or secular institutions, they never deny it. Rather, they ensure that this marginalized and even stigmatized religious identity is subtly signified through their personal presentation, behavior, practices and commentary. Hence, although monks may choose to argue that they are merely acknowledging, praising and endorsing the moral propriety of a devout layperson and patron, professional spirit mediums can interpret these same acts as a

legitimizing recognition of their esteemed moral status as a spirit medium which they see as foundationally undergirding their ability to be a devout layperson.

The relationship of Buddhist monks to professional spirit mediums, in turn, is socially and symbolically complex, and it would seem to constitute a continuum of ideological, social and practical accommodations to both the idea and practice of professional spirit mediumship and the financial and social support they can cultivate, organize and provide. As the most definitive exemplars and representatives of normative Buddhist values and beliefs within Thai society, the majority of Buddhist monks tend to endorse a critical attitude toward mediums which can range anywhere along a spectrum from benign tolerance and dismissive marginalization to stern repudiation and overt denial. Most monks, however, presumably have few sustained contacts with professional spirit mediums, and few have any reason to explicitly and directly seek out a medium. Instead, most actual social contacts between monks and mediums are the result of mediums seeking out monks so that the latter can either provide merit-making services to mediums or assist in the organization of those merit-making activities or religious projects spearheaded by mediums. Within this diverse range of specific interactions, moreover, one can map out a general continuum of modes of accommodation which monks employ with regards to professional spirit mediums.

First, the majority of interactions between monks and mediums are structured by the dominant, overarching logic of the normative relations that should exist between Theravada Buddhist monks and laity. Interactions in this framework require very little accommodation by monks to the more unconventional ideas and practice endorsed by professional spirit mediums or their followers. Rather, monks instead simply relate to mediums as any other Thai Buddhist layperson, and extend to them the same range of services, ritual and otherwise, which any and all

layperson can expect from monks and which the latter cannot reasonably refuse. Thus, for example, professional mediums invite monks to their royal abodes (*tamnak*) on important occasions – such as when they open the abode or on the morning of their annual *wai khru* ceremony honoring their possessing spirits – so that they can make merit by feeding and offering donations to the monks, who chant Buddhist scripture and mantras and bless the layperson / medium and his or her residence / abode in return. Similarly, when mediums organize *thaut pha pa* or *kathin* donations, monks receive these offerings and provide blessings in return just as they would for any other layperson. In these interactions, Buddhist monks find it easy, and in fact necessary, to respectfully recognize and valorize the conventional material and social support offered by professional spirit mediums, even treating them as exemplary and devout lay patrons of Buddhism and the Sangha when such recognition is required.

Second, a minority of interactions between monks and mediums require that Buddhist monks reach some kind of accommodation with and recognition of a professional spirit medium's religious authority and ritual practice as at least provisionally authentic, legitimate, and valuable. For obvious ideological, institutional and social reasons, these accommodations are more difficult, and hence rarer. However, a small number of monks have achieved this accommodation which requires a stance of support and endorsement that goes beyond mere benign tolerance. The clearest example of this type of recognition emerges during the annual *phithi wai khru* ceremonies held by all professional spirit mediums. In Bangkok a few select monks are known to regularly attend these ceremonies, sometimes as relatively passive observers or esteemed guests, but also sometimes as crucial participants who actively take part in specific central sequences of ritual action. Such behavior is unconventional for monks precisely because it not only violates a general expectation of distanced opposition, both social and symbolic,

which should normatively exist between monks and mediums, but also because it implicitly expresses a clear public recognition of professional spirit mediums as mediums, as individuals in a state of possession by sacrally potent *jao* and *thep*, and not simply as devout laity. It is not surprising, therefore, that only a small minority of monks in Bangkok regularly take part in the ritual celebrations of professional spirit mediums.

Finally, the most extreme refashioning of the traditional oppositional relationship between spirit possession and spirit mediums and Buddhism and Buddhist monks involves not only a contextual and ultimately limited ideological acceptance of the religious identity and ritual authority of professional spirit mediumship, but vigorous identification with the fundamental ethos and practice of mediumship. The prime example of this stance of practically complete accommodation are those very, very few monks who claim to be possessed by *jao* or *thep* and regularly enter states of possession despite the fact that they still live under the disciplinary code of the Vinaya and continue to wear Buddhist robes. This form of accommodation is so heterodox, however, that it is envisioned as extreme and improper by both monks and professional spirit mediums. Although mediums could provide explanations for why this situation could exist, they nonetheless asserted without hesitation that monks becoming possessed was highly inappropriate and unorthodox from their perspective.<sup>70</sup> Consequently, they reacted with a certain amount of unease when these monks would show up at public ceremonies,

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<sup>70</sup> Most of these explanations centered on the idea that *jao* or *thep* had chosen these men as their mediums long before they were ordained within the Buddhist Sangha. Thus, that intimate personal tie and identification between host and possessing spirit persisted despite the subsequent assumption of the role and identity of monastic renunciant, even as the ability to performatively enact that relationship and identification through the act of possession was rendered impossible because of their new Buddhist role and identity as monks. This explanation, however, did not explain how and why they could continue to become possessed once they became monks. Professional spirit mediums acknowledged that this continued possession violated foundational presumptions about the relationship between monastic renunciation and spirit possession, between the ultimate authority of the Buddha and the *jao* and *thep* who served and supported him. One professional spirit medium I knew who was ordained as a monk for a Lenten period, for example, never became possessed during that time and stated explicitly that it was impossible to do so. Although his *jao* and *thep* might continue to communicate with him by visiting him in his dreams, from his perspective they actually could not possess him as long as he remained a properly ordained monk.

although many followers or clients in the audience expressed fewer reservations about treating these possessed monks in a similar manner to how they treated most other professional spirit mediums (although prohibitions about physical contact between monks and females persisted).<sup>71</sup>

In general then, one can conclude that with the rise of professional spirit mediumship there has developed a selective relaxation of that multi-dimensional oppositional distance between spirit mediumship and Buddhism which scholars have seen as a key characteristic of Thai Theravada Buddhism. This asymmetrical narrowing of the distance between Buddhism and Buddhist monks and spirit possession and professional spirit mediums, however, has primarily consisted of spirit mediums reconceptualizing their identities, practices and goals so that they now are more thoroughly defined, both in their minds and in the minds of their followers and clients, in terms of normative Buddhist beliefs and practices, goals and desires, roles and institutions. At the same time, there has been no similar widespread accommodation to the idea and practice of spirit mediumship on the part of Buddhism, whether conceptualized as either a dominant religious ideology or a dominant institutional order within Thai society. Nonetheless, a select but limited number of individual monks have developed more accommodating stances which actively support, and occasionally even deeply identify with, the authority, authenticity and legitimacy of professional spirit mediums as a distinct religious role and identity. In the eyes of professional spirit mediums, these latter explicit acts of recognition are powerfully vindicating. Consequently, there is often a strategic, if apparently mostly unconscious, tendency among professional spirit mediums to conflate the recognition which some monks grant to spirit

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<sup>71</sup> Although most monks were dismissive and highly critical of the idea that a monk could or should be subject to possession, one high-ranking administrator in the Buddhist university at Mahathat temple in Bangkok stated in an interview with me that strictly speaking, there were no prohibitions in the Buddhist monastic code, or Vinaya, which prohibited such behavior. Therefore, strictly speaking, possession did not constitute a punishable violation of the Theravada Buddhist Vinaya code in his opinion. In this same vein, Tanabe cites cases of *mae chi*, contemporary Thai female renunciants modeled after the classical – but now extinct – role of Theravada Buddhist nuns, who are possessed by *jao* (Tanabe 2002: 57).

mediums as spirit mediums with the recognition all monks are required to grant to spirit mediums as devout laypersons.

*Changes in the conceptualization of hierarchy and authority between and among spirit mediums.* Only limited ethnographic detail and analysis is provided in the academic literature on the subjects of either the social relations of hierarchy and authority established between the various spirit mediums of ancestral and / or guardian spirit cults or the cultural idioms in which those social relations were expressed. No doubt this silence is partly due to the fact that most studies of these cultural forms of spirit mediumship were carried out in rural areas in the context of village studies. Given the already mentioned frequent failure of these cults to necessarily have a spirit medium at all times and the subsequent limited number of mediums to be found within any given village field site, examining with any precision the forms of hierarchy and authority existing between spirit mediums would have proven rather difficult unless scholars explicitly focused on intra-village or regional social and cultural dynamics in these cults.

Nonetheless, there are certain clues. Tambiah briefly describes a regional complex of shrines and spirits in the Northeast in the 1960s which relies upon several chief mediums, who are male, and subsidiary mediums, who are primarily female. The chief mediums serve as the central officiants of a regional prosperity cult, while the subsidiary mediums primarily resolve individual personal cases of spirit affliction caused by regional or village guardian spirits (Tambiah 1970: 282-283). Kirsch, on the other hand, explicitly addresses this question, explaining that the *mau phi* in his Northeastern region in the 1960s lacked any collective social organization, although they did hold a series of joint ceremonies (*liang phi*) designed to feed, entertain and strengthen their individual “familiar spirits.” Kirsch however explains that “each ‘spirit doctor’ served as the host to the others serially, but there were no implications of a

hierarchical ordering among them” (Kirsch 1967: 376). Any difference in rank between mediums was seen as a result of certain “familiar spirits” being more powerful or effective than others. In addition, when novice *mau phi* were initiated into their new role during the “Thanking the Spirit” ceremony (*phithi khaup khun phi*), ideally several senior “spirit doctors” would gather together for the occasion in order to encourage the new novice into dancing, an act which ideally should cause the possessing spirit within her to manifest itself performatively. Kirsch, however, does not mention any clear or sharp hierarchy of relations between senior and junior mediums during these initiation rites either (Kirsch 1967: 398-399). The most detailed ethnographic descriptions of ancestral cults generally fail to discuss, or at least discuss in any significant detail, the relations of hierarchy and authority between different spirit mediums within the cults, although the idiom of age would appear to be clearly central to the construction of both hierarchy and authority within these cults (Irvine 1982; Tanabe 1991).

What is remarkably absent in all of these descriptions of spirit mediums within ancestral and guardian spirit cults of various kinds throughout Thailand, however, is a feature which all observers of professional spirit mediums comment on: the ideology of the empowered teacher (*khru*) and the regular ritual reproduction of hierarchical relations between senior and junior mediums during each medium’s annual *phithi wai khru* (honoring one’s teacher) ceremony. In many ways, the *phithi wai khru* of professional spirit mediums resemble in content and ethos much of what Kirsch described with regards to the *phithi liang phi* that he observed among *mau phi* in the Northeast of Thailand in the 1960s: boisterous music and dancing, revelry and entertainment designed to honor the possessing spirits of the host medium, a serial round of ceremonies in which each medium sequentially serves as the host to an assembly of other mediums. The only significant missing element is the consumption of alcohol and the behavioral



abandon associated with inebriation, a not surprising absence given the more restrained and austere character of the *jao* and *thep* that possess professional spirit mediums, as well as the latter's concern to appear properly moral and virtuous in a decidedly conventional Buddhist sense as exemplified by the behavior of the Buddhist monk.

Yet grafted onto this similar ritual ethos and practice during the professional spirit medium's annual *phithi wai khru* celebration of remembrance and respect is the ideology of the empowered teacher, submission to a lineage of spirits and an elder teacher spirit, and the regular ritual subordination of junior mediums to their senior teacher mediums. In its broad ritual form and ideological justification, but not the specific ritual elements and sequences which make up the ceremony, the *phithi wai khru* of professional spirit mediums is essentially identical to those ceremonies of hierarchical subordination and empowering identification traditionally performed by senior *mau* for their lineage of students (Wong 2001). In the *phithi wai khru*, junior spirit mediums pay public respect to that more senior medium who organized their *khraup khru* initiation ceremony into a lineage of empowered teachers. The *khraup khru* ceremony in turn formally extends and deepens their enduring relationship with a named and particular possessing *jao* or *thep*, which itself was marked by a previous *rap khan* ceremony. And the *rap khan* ceremony serves in many ways as the formal initial ceremonial marker of entry into the subculture of professional spirit mediums as an individual with a propensity towards possession by devout and august gods. Hence, in the annual *wai khru* ceremony of the senior medium who organized their various initiations, junior mediums renew their religious identities as professional spirit mediums in general and lineage member in particular. They also simultaneously acknowledging their immense spiritual and moral debt to that senior medium, and his senior teaching spirit, who is now perceived as originally publicly and definitively identifying,

authenticating and ratifying their new social and religious identity, alleviating their suffering and confusion in the process.<sup>72</sup>

Yet in many ways, the justification for the ideology of the *khru* among professional spirit mediums remains ambiguous and even somewhat discordant, both as an idea and in practice. Many Bangkok professional spirit mediums in contexts outside of these ceremonies, after all, explained to me, in a manner similar to those spirit mediums traditionally associated with ancestral and guardian spirit cults (for instance see Kirsch 1967: 402), that they do not need to learn anything to be successful spirit mediums because their possessing *jao* or *thep* bring with them all the skills, knowledge and techniques of supramundane potency they require to heal and assist a suffering humanity. It is precisely because of this stance, in fact, that foreign scholars have often distinguished the role of *khon song* from that of *mau*, because the latter's ideological legitimacy and social efficacy is so clearly dependent rhetorically and practically upon establishing oneself as a devoted novice under the tutelage of a benevolent and powerful master teacher (Hanks 1963: 25). Moreover, in practice the establishment of clear lines of personal and dyadic hierarchy, seniority and authority between professional spirit mediums remains a perpetually fragile affair within the subculture of professional spirit mediums, fraught with anxieties about submission, domination, disrespect and betrayal. As a result therefore, one rarely witnesses within the subculture those types of careful, intimate and life-long personalized instruction and mentorship which are more typically associated with *mau* and its idealized

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<sup>72</sup> This normative and stereotypic understanding of lineage, submission, and membership in terms of a single, determinative dyadic series of relations is complicated in social reality by the fact that many individuals undergo multiple *rap khan* ceremonies. Other ceremonial moments of recognition by other senior mediums publicly identifying an individual as someone with a propensity towards possession and as an authentic servant to the gods, therefore, are displaced and effaced during any particular *wai khru* ceremony. The social possibility of multiple and conflicting dyadic relations of apprentice subordination and senior mentorship are ritually ruled out of existence.

teacher-student relationship as seen, for instance, in contemporary instruction in elite artistic traditions, such as classical Thai music (Wong 2001).

Nonetheless, the idea of the empowered teacher (*khru*) as the locus for the transmission of esoteric knowledge and the regular reconstitution of empowering relations of mentorship and subordination are important ideological elements within the rhetoric of hierarchy and authority that characterizes the contemporary subculture of professional spirit mediums, even if the social recognition and practical instantiation of that ideal is more ambivalent and complicated in reality. At the same time, however, this defining ideological characteristic of professional spirit mediums also strongly differentiates this form of spirit possession and spirit mediumship from other modalities of spirit possession and spirit mediumship in Thai society and culture as well. This distinctiveness is most evidenced by the fact that no other modality of spirit mediumship in Thailand employs the rhetoric of *khru* or the ritual form of the *wai khru* ceremony for structuring hierarchical relations in its collective life.

Defining Ritual Practices of Professional Spirit Mediumship. What is most defining about the ritual practices of professional spirit mediums is not, for the most part, the particular types of esoteric knowledge, thaumaturgic techniques or therapeutic services that they provide to their clients and followers. In fact, most of those forms of esoteric knowledge, thaumaturgic technique and therapeutic intervention, which together constitute and undergird the typical repertoire of ritual practices which most contemporary professional spirit mediums employ, have clearly recognizable historical precedents within the wider field of mainstream Thai popular religiosity. Inevitably, of course, particular individual professional spirit mediums display a certain unique degree of expertise and innovation in their mastery over different elements within this general ritual repertoire or they combine and emphasize different elements of this repertoire in a

distinctly characteristic manner when serving their clients and followers. In this sense then, they differ little from other religious actors who provide thaumaturgic assistance to those in need of assistance.

Ultimately, rather, that historical innovation which is so uniquely defining of the ritual practices of contemporary professional spirit mediumship lies instead in the expanding range and diversity of those forms of esoteric knowledge, thaumaturgic technique and therapeutic service which professional spirit mediums claim to be accomplished in and capable of authoritatively employing to answer the worldly needs of those who seek them out. What is most historically innovative about the ritual practices of contemporary professional spirit mediums, in other words, is the way they have eclectically combined together and claimed competency in a diverse range of knowledges and practices which were previously distributed in a more exclusive fashion amongst numerous other Thai popular religious practitioners, experts and virtuosos according to scholars. In the process, professional spirit mediums have expanded and “upgraded” the cultural foundations of their claim to religious competency and authority beyond those more narrow traditional sources of expertise most typically associated with prior twentieth-century modalities of Thai spirit mediumship. In what follows I discuss two dimensions of their ritual practices: their expanding repertoire of knowledge and technique and their expanding repertoire of therapeutic services.

*Expanding repertoire of supramundane knowledges and techniques.* The spirit mediums of ancestral and guardian spirit cults typically possessed a limited range of thaumaturgic techniques and supramundane forms of knowledge. Much of these techniques and knowledge relied upon the medium’s ability to act as a conduit of communication with a possessing *phi* or *jao*. Through communication with a relatively powerful or strategically knowledgeable spirit via

the medium, patients and clients could determine which spirit was attacking them and what kinds of offerings or propitiation was necessary to placate the offending spirit and thus remove the underlying supramundane cause of somatic affliction or existential insecurity. Likewise, through communication via a medium, individuals or communities could determine what types of offerings and propitiation was necessary to ensure generalized communal benefits such as agricultural productivity, material prosperity, or social harmony. Communication with various spirits also facilitated divination, which seems to have relied primarily upon the superior knowledge and perception of supramundane entities for its efficacy. In addition, however, sometimes spirit mediums in ancestral and guardian spirit cults displayed and utilized other forms of knowledge that might be more generally shared among the Thai populace, such as more naturalistic forms of folk medicine, like massage, and widely known basic ritual practices such as the folk Brahmanical ritual of restoring and binding vital-essences (Kirsch 1967; Tambiah 1970; Irvine 1982; Tanabe 1991).

The extent to which spirit mediums traditionally could claim to rely upon competencies and abilities not directly resulting from the capacity to communicate with possessing supramundane entities is not always clear in the existing ethnographic and historical literature. To some degree, they have always claimed to possess a somewhat eclectic mix of superior knowledge and efficacious practices. Nonetheless, contemporary professional spirit mediums have intensified this eclecticism to a much more heightened and pervasive degree than was true in the past, combining a variety of otherwise unrelated sources of knowledge together with the more conventional repertoires of healing and divination traditionally at the disposal of spirit mediums (Tanabe 2002: 56). In the process, they have rendered themselves more analogous to other types of religious experts or virtuosos within mainstream Thai popular religion. This

expanded repertoire of esoteric knowledges and techniques currently found among professional spirit mediums includes: various techniques of astrology and fortune telling (*horasat*); skill in employing incantations (*khatha*) that provide everything from general spiritual strengthening to the sacralization of charms and amulets; techniques for improving the chain of causality at the level of fate (*khrau*) and luck (*chok*); techniques for propitiating, appeasing and expelling spirits; skill in removing and ameliorating sorcery and malevolent magical manipulation; and knowledge in naturalistic techniques such as herbal medicinal therapy.

In the process of expanding the repertoire of efficacious esoteric knowledge at their command, professional spirit mediums have laid claim to a range of discrete forms of esoteric knowledge and ritual techniques that most scholars have seen as the segregated, monopolistic repertoire of expert *mau* who had learned them through personalized relationships of mentorship with accomplished teachers (*khru*). In this sense, therefore, professional spirit mediums have transgressed some of the conventional differences which distinguished spirit mediums from other types of experts in the field of Thai popular religiosity who also provided thaumaturgic services to laity in need of healing or protection. Thus, one can see that professional spirit mediums have not only appropriated the ideology of empowerment and authority traditionally associated with *mau*, but they have also, quite naturally, appropriated those very types of esoteric knowledge, embodied technique and supramundane efficacy which are also transmitted within these folk Brahmanical modes of hierarchical teacher-student mentorship (Tanabe 2002: 55-56).

From another perspective, this expanding range of knowledge and techniques at their disposal represents the appropriation by professional spirit mediums, the majority of whom remain women, of forms of esoteric knowledge and morally charged religious authority which

have been monopolized traditionally by men in Thai society (Tanabe 2002: 55-56).<sup>73</sup>

Conventionally, most of these forms of esoteric knowledge and ritual efficacy were known only by men and transmitted only between men, with monks or ex-monks serving as key figures in these chains of authoritative transmission and the Buddhist Sangha serving as a key institutional locus within which these forms of knowledge were accumulated, preserved and transmitted. The moral discipline and monastic training of monks were envisioned as important foundations for cultivating the strength of character, mind and body necessary to allow ritual experts to adequately handle these potentially dangerous, potently-charged forms of esoteric knowledge. This accumulation and amalgamation of diverse types of esoteric knowledge within the conventional repertoire of contemporary professional spirit mediums, therefore, represents yet another dimension of that broader historical and sociocultural process by which professional spirit mediums have reframed their religious role, identity and practice as more explicitly and directly in accordance with a conventionally normative Buddhist-defined worldview and ethos.

*Expanding repertoire of therapeutic services and thaumaturgic techniques.* As the sources of esoteric knowledge and supramundane efficacy claimed by professional spirit mediums have expanded, the diversity of therapeutic services and thaumaturgic techniques which clients and followers can request of them has likewise expanded. Spirit mediums associated with ancestral and guardian spirit cults typically dealt with a narrow range of problems requiring either healing or divination, problems whose ultimate source typically could be traced back in some way to the disruptive influence of malevolent *phi* or disgruntled *jao*, as manifested through the idiom of spirit attack or spirit possession. But given both the diverse range of esoteric knowledges at their command and the greater supramundane powers associated

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<sup>73</sup> Although the dominance of women as an absolute majority seems to have declined, especially among Bangkok professional spirit mediums. Some limited surveys indicate that only 60 percent of spirit mediums in Bangkok are females (Patamajorn 2007: 73).

with the more elevated cosmological status of the *jao* and *thep* which possess them, professional spirit mediums currently address a far more diverse range of mundane problems and provide a broader range of thaumaturgic services than was conventionally considered appropriate for the spirit mediums of guardian tutelary spirits, for example.

It is exceedingly difficult to list comprehensively or categorize precisely either all of the various types of problems and concerns that clients bring to professional spirit mediums or the diversity of techniques which mediums employ to address and solve these different dilemmas. After all, the process through which these problems, their diagnosis and their resolution are contextually negotiated, defined and agreed upon is highly complex, reiterative and contingent in actual practice. Clients initially offering up one type of problem (poor health, a failing business or an estranged spouse, for instance) discover mediums who reframe the source of their problem within a diverse range of contrasting but equally relevant interpretive frames of moral, supramundane and naturalistic explanation (bad karma; poor astrological conditions bestowing bad luck and poor fate; sorcery and black magic; spirit attack; weak moral character; inadequate devotional activity; social ill will and opposition from peers, superiors or intimates, for instance) and then propose in response an equally diverse range of multi-pronged techniques to be pursued either simultaneously or sequentially (make merit; regularly chant Buddhist prayers; receive protective blessings by the possessing *jao* or *thep* via charms, holy water or incantations; undergo ceremonies designed to drive away bad fate; exorcise malevolent spirits; correct improprieties involving the establishment of household shrines or the treatment of protective deities, for instance). Schematic models of problems, diagnoses and solutions, consequently, fail to address the highly emergent quality of that complex, multi-faceted, and negotiated social process through which the ultimate social, psychological and moral meaning of a client's



personal dilemmas and afflictions are identified, reframed and reconceptualized, and more or less adequately resolved, nor the cascading logic by which one set of problems and solutions can begat further issues that also seemingly demand to be resolved in turn.

Nonetheless, one can identify several broad types of problems, services and techniques frequently associated with contemporary professional spirit mediums in the Bangkok metropolitan region. These problems, services and techniques, moreover, clearly reveal how different professional spirit mediums are from other modalities of Thai spirit mediumship as these have been conceptualized within the ethnographic literature. Health problems involving somatic afflictions and identifiable illnesses are one common concern which clients hope mediums can improve or solve, although health problems do not seem to be the predominant reason why clients seek out mediums, despite the widespread impression to the contrary among most Thais. Chronic somatic afflictions, both mild and severe, which are neither easily diagnosed nor easily cured by Western bio-medicine seem to represent the most common candidates for treatment. Common examples include diabetes, paralysis, cancer of various kinds, alcoholism, generalized non-specific pains, mental dissociation, lethargy, anxiety and depression. Another broad set of common problems brought to the attention of professional spirit mediums involves domestic and personal problems – spouses who are unfaithful, irresponsible or absent, boyfriends and girlfriends who resist romantic commitment, fiancées who resist marriage, children who are troublesome or unsuccessful in school, in-laws who are disruptive or controlling. These and other cases in which familial and emotional intimates either fail to fulfill their normative role expectations or provoke domestic disturbances centered around conflicting role expectations are even more prominent than health problems among the concerns that clients frequently bring to professional spirit mediums in their search for a solution. Finally, occupational and business

troubles are also common concerns among clients – employees worried about their failure to advance in their career, students concerned that they will fail future academic exams, workers concerned about superiors and co-workers undermining their success, entrepreneurs whose businesses are stagnant or failing due to problems with sales, profit or debt, businessmen concerned about risky future investments or commercial transactions.

Although clients in Bangkok often are interested in general advice for general problems, they also seek out mediums for more than just open-ended prognostication and advice. In this sense, many clients are frequently interested in quite specific types of assistance regarding very particular pressing dilemmas or personal needs. They wish to ensure a positive outcome in a court case. They want to avoid military service. They need to find an important and valuable, but lost, object. They need to remove the malign influence of sorcery or to undergo an exorcism. They seek winning lottery numbers and future financial prosperity. They need a land ownership document to be blessed so that a future sale will be advantageous and lucrative. They desire blessings to ensure success in an upcoming enterprise or trip. They have to undergo the initiatory *rap khan* ceremony in order to acknowledge formally the *jao* or *thep* which is possessing them so that they can relieve the chronic suffering it is inflicting on them. They need advice or assistance in setting up a household or guardian spirit shrines, or in making adjustments to an already existing shrine which seems to be failing. They want a statue from their own personal or household altar to be blessed. They are looking for charms and amulets that will protect them from misfortune. They need love magic either to improve their overall charm and attractiveness, or perhaps to seduce that certain special someone. They need a new, more auspicious personal name. They need to know what day and time is a particularly auspicious moment for opening a

new business, beginning a trip or getting married. They want their car blessed in order to avoid traffic accidents.

Despite the incredible diversity of quite particular techniques within the potential repertoire of the average professional spirit medium, one can roughly categorize these techniques into three broad, if somewhat overlapping, types of ritual practice: prognostication, protection, and blessings. Prognostication (*phayakon*) can consist of making predictions (*tham nai*) and retrospective evaluations by relying on different methods such as determining a client's unique, astrologically auspicious and inauspicious periods of time, interpreting candle wax drippings in a bowl of water, or employing the supramundane foresight of the possessing *jao* or *thep*. Protection (*paung kan*) frequently consists of a variety of techniques for ensuring general good luck and fortune. These include manipulative rituals such as averting ill fate (*sadau khrau*), severing the ties of past suffering and hardship (*tat wibak kam*), or extending one's destiny (*tau chata*). It also includes performing conventional acts of merit making (*tham bun*) or moral, ascetic discipline in an intensified manner in order to beneficially alter the total configuration of one's overall fortune and destiny. Finally, there are many techniques for bestowing blessings (*hai phon*) which are designed to improve an individual's general auspiciousness (*sri mongkhon*) and strength in the face of his or her mundane worldly challenges by tapping the supramundane moral potency of the possessing *jao* or *thep*. For example, mediums sprinkle or bathe clients and objects with water they have sacralized (*phrom nam mon*), blow incantations over bodies and objects (*pao khatha*), anoint (*coem*) bodies and objects with pastes they have sacralized, instruct clients to drink water mixed with incense powder or burnt paper charms that they have created, or provide clients with protective amulets and charms they have infused with the meritorious virtue (*barami*) of the *jao* and *thep* which possess them.

As a category of religious practitioner in the field of contemporary mainstream Thai popular religiosity, professional spirit mediums in general are expected to be able potentially to offer assistance regarding any of these mundane concerns, even if not all mediums have the ability to solve all of these problems and many mediums develop a reputation for being particularly skilled in employing certain kinds of techniques or resolving certain kinds of worldly dilemmas. In general, however, all of the problems which clients bring to professional spirit mediums revolve around certain general core existential dilemmas: immediate concrete frustrations of lack, absence, disappointment and failure in the present; threats of obstacles, failure and deprivation in the near future; or uncertainty concerning a successful course of action regarding important future plans, goals and projects.

Defining Social Organization of Professional Spirit Mediumship. Many scholars of contemporary Thai religiosity have noted different elements of that more entrepreneurial role and identity which characterizes the social relationship between professional spirit mediums and their clients (Irvine 1984; Wijeyewardene 1986; Muecke 1992; Yagi 1988; Pattana 1999; Morris 2000; Tanabe 2002, Anan 2003). However, often these scholars have not examined fully how these changes in the character of the professional spirit medium's public social role and identity are related to other transformations in the ideology, practice and social organization of professional spirit mediumship as a total social phenomenon or the comparative significance of understanding these changes vis-à-vis other modalities of twentieth-century Thai spirit mediumship. Nor have they examined how this more professional religious identity is a product of other important transformations within those broader social relations which are also centrally defining of contemporary professional spirit mediumship, social relations in which the mediums have become charismatic patrons at the center of personality-based entourages as well as

members of loosely articulated social networks within a broader subculture of like-minded peers, followers and clients.

Spirit mediums associated with ancestral and guardian spirit cults only occasionally experienced spirit possession, and these occasions primarily were limited to annual obligatory ceremonies of propitiation and feasting linked to agricultural seasons or local religious mythologies as well as those ad hoc rituals of intervention occasionally requested by individuals. Professional spirit mediums, however, voluntarily cultivate (as well as involuntarily experience) possession on a regular basis. Sometimes possession is even experienced on a daily basis, with multiple occasions of voluntary or involuntary possession occurring within a single day. It is common, for example, to find Bangkok professional spirit mediums who open their royal abodes (*tamnak*) to receive clients three, four, or five days a week, with the days and hours when the medium will be available for consultations clearly visible on signs hanging outside the abode, prominently printed in mass media advertisements or articles, or discretely included on personal business cards they carry with them.<sup>74</sup> Some abodes are only open to the public for one session of consultation a day, often scheduled in the evening, while others hold two sessions, one in the afternoon and one in the evening. Each session often lasts as long as three hours but can extend for an even longer amount of time if circumstances, such as a high number of waiting clients or particularly demanding problems, warrant it. Some abodes hold consultation sessions that last until midnight, and sometimes followers and clients can expect to find themselves still at a medium's abode until 1:00am or later on an irregular basis. In general, most abodes in Bangkok

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<sup>74</sup> Traditionally, the absolute exceptions to this schedule of consultations are those special monastic "holy days" (*wan phra*) within the lunar calendar when intensified Buddhist practice and moral discipline by devout individuals is considered normal. Mediums often explain that their possessing *jao* and *thep* go to listen to the Buddha deliver teachings and sermons on those days, and thus are not available to descend to the earth. Not all Bangkok professional spirit mediums, however, abstain from serving clients on these days. In addition, it is commonly held that menstruation produces a form of spiritual pollution which renders the female body unavailable for possession by elevated *jao* and *thep*. Thus, in principle female spirit mediums should not be able to become possessed when they are menstruating either.

schedule their days and hours of operation to fit the typical industrial work schedule of Bangkok residents. Thus, most abodes are open a smattering of evenings during the week as well as for more extended hours on Saturday and Sunday. Similarly, some Bangkok professional spirit mediums seem to prefer to schedule special occasional rites or annual ceremonies for weekends when they know it will be easier for followers and clients to attend, even if such scheduling prevents a strict adherence to the normatively proper ritual calendar.

In addition, a second crucially defining characteristic of the professional spirit medium role is the fact that by virtue of the elevated status and supra-local identity of the *jao* and *thep* which possess them, they regularly, and on principle, offer advice and assistance to a socially diverse set of clients and followers, not just those who belong to their kinship group or local residence community. Moreover, their clients are much more likely to be strangers or anonymous acquaintances rather than the familiar co-members in a distinct and bounded social community as is the case with spirit mediums associated with ancestral and guardian spirit cults. In Bangkok, therefore, professional spirit mediums are not conceptualized as sources of communal authority who regulate, reinforce and reproduce bounded forms of distinct, local collective identity. They serve, rather, a diverse set of individual clients who come to them with primarily personal problems and who are generally unknown to, unrelated to, and unconcerned with most of the other clients who also visit the same medium. Moreover, clients can choose among any number of potential mediums to visit, and mediums in turn cannot presume that clients will inevitably return to them for further consolations if their diagnoses, advice, assistance or supramundane interventions prove less than adequate. In this sense then, the social environment within which professional spirit mediums live out their religious identity in Bangkok is characterized by a heightened mood of generalized and relatively anonymous

competition between different spirit mediums, as well as between spirit mediums and other purveyors of thaumaturgic assistance.

One significant consequence of this difference in the frequency of spirit possession and the underlying social relationship between mediums and clients is that professional spirit mediums typically relate to their role as a spirit medium very differently from other modalities of twentieth-century indigenous Thai spirit mediums. For spirit mediums associated with ancestral and guardian spirit cults, the occasional and irregular nature of the obligations and responsibilities attached to their status as a spirit medium ensures that the role is only modestly defining of their overall social identity. This dynamic is reinforced by the generally low status attached to the role, especially when compared to other officials in these cults such as ritual intermediaries. For many Bangkok professional spirit mediums, however, the role of spirit medium often constitutes their primary social identity in both a public and a private sense. This fact is especially likely to be true in the case of the more popular and famous mediums in Bangkok.

In addition, unlike the case in other modalities of Thai mediumship, the role of spirit medium is often the primary occupation of professional spirit mediums. Some mediums, of course, earn a living from a traditional job or occupation and only serve their *jao* and *thep* in their remaining free time, primarily evenings and weekends. But for many professional spirit mediums in Bangkok, again especially the most popular and famous ones who have developed a large and regular clientele, mediumship is their primary occupation. It is the primary way they earn a living and support themselves, as well as patronize their followers and underwrite the lavish, celebratory worship that their possessing *jao* and *thep* require as befitting their elevated moral status. Hence, mediumship is not simply a supplementary source of income for these

professional spirit mediums, and they must, therefore, receive an adequate cash income from their clients and supporters in order to maintain an adequate livelihood befitting both themselves, their possessing *jao* and *thep*, and their abode.<sup>75</sup> Yet given this occupational centrality of mediumship to many a medium's life, the general social environment of heightened competition between various mediums is also troubling to each and every medium. They all require a regular, if not increasing, flow of financial support to maintain their abode, but at the same time they are not guaranteed clients and they face competition from other mediums and even other religious and ritual experts who offer somewhat similar techniques and services.

Each of these three basic changes in the definition and organization of those social roles and relationships that fundamentally define professional spirit mediumship reinforces the others and underlies why this form of mediumship has been characterized by numerous scholars as entrepreneurial or professional in nature. As a cultural phenomenon characterized by particular patterns of social interactions between a spirit medium and those seeking his or her services, therefore, professional spirit mediumship is fundamentally different from other indigenous forms of Thai mediumship. The distinctive social character of professional spirit mediumship, however, is not limited simply to the organization of those dyadic social relations between a medium and his or her clients. This distinctiveness also extends to the organization of those more collective and enduring social relations centered around and cultivated by professional spirit mediums which extends beyond the provision of therapeutic services to clients.

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<sup>75</sup> The occupational centrality of mediumship creates serious and inevitable tensions, however, because the traditional model for compensating spirit mediums as reported in the ethnographic literature involves only modest and mostly symbolic guaranteed payments of money and goods, supplemented by more irregular but substantial compensation of a voluntary nature when the possessing spirit delivers the consequences desired. Guaranteed payments of a more substantial and regular character, however, threaten to undermine any professional medium's necessary claim to represent and embody virtuousness, selflessness and authenticity. As a result, the very social organization of a professional spirit medium's services continually exposes them to the threat of charges that they are, in fact, greedy, self-interested and deceptive.



The majority of scholars who have studied professional spirit mediums have focused almost exclusively on the dyadic social relations between these mediums and their individual clients. Lost in this narrow focus on one admittedly important form of sociality which defines professional spirit mediumship are other more collective dimensions of social life which, although neglected by scholars, are nonetheless central to the lived daily life, social value and cultural meaning of contemporary mediumship for both mediums themselves and their followers and clients. One of these dimensions entails the fact that ideally a successful professional spirit medium should also be a benevolent patron who builds around himself a sizable and stable entourage of followers and disciples, and not just clients. This entourage is normatively characterized by a basic logic of asymmetrical reciprocity found with patron-client relations more generally in Thailand and elsewhere in Southeast Asia: the medium liberally supports his or her followers both materially and spiritually, while the followers provide loyalty and social and material assistance in return. Spirit mediums associated with ancestral and guardian spirit cults, by contrast, are never expected to serve as abiding individual patrons or to develop stable entourages of loyal dependents around them, and the academic literature does not contain examples of them trying to build up such entourages.

In addition, central to the value and identity of Bangkok professional spirit mediums – in the eyes of both mediums and their followers – is the assumption that mediums are a refuge and a benefactor (*thi phueng*), someone who provides generous and selfless assistance on a regular, sustained, and everyday basis, but especially in times of distress and difficulty. And the surest proof that mediums are, in fact, a true protective refuge is their creation of an entourage around themselves, an entourage filled with members who provide support and assistance whenever it is needed by their benefactor. These entourages centered around the charismatic authority of the

medium, in turn, provide the social foundation upon which that intimate and personality-based devotional ethos and identification found commonly within the subculture can flourish.

Professional spirit mediumship in Bangkok, however, is more than just a terrain of hundreds of discrete entourages centered around an abode, the medium (or mediums) who have established that abode, and the *jao* or *thep* who regularly descend for possession at that abode. Rather, all of these abodes, mediums and entourages, in turn, collectively constitute a loosely bounded and weakly structured subculture of professional spirit mediumship. In Bangkok this subculture is based in part on the relatively enduring social relations of cyclical yet delayed reciprocity and assistance which forms between abodes as a result of the requirement that a successful *phithi wai khru* ceremony requires the attendance of not only junior mediums who were initiated by the hosting medium, but also of other mediums who are peers, and preferably as many of the latter as is possible. As a consequence, every abode is embedded by necessity in multiple sets of dyadic relations of obligated delayed reciprocity with other mediums and abodes, relations which often overlap and build into persistent but informal social networks encompassing multiple mediums. In addition, this subculture as a domain of broadly shared norms, narratives and expectations is further buttressed, reinforced and generalized through those popular mass print magazines which circulate a constant stream of stereotypic images and tales about professional spirit mediums amongst that segment of the general Bangkok reading public which has an interest in these matters. In comparison with other twentieth-century Thai forms of spirit mediumship, however, the scale, intensity and persistence of this subculture of professional spirit mediumship has no equivalent parallel when examined as a collective social and cultural phenomenon of both concrete social relations and mass-mediated imagery.

## Conclusions

In this chapter I have sought to specify more clearly the particular cultural meaning and social significance of contemporary professional spirit mediumship through a comparative analysis designed to tease out the sociocultural distinctiveness of professional mediumship as a form of ideology, ritual practice and social organization. In order to more precisely identify this distinctiveness, I have contrasted professional spirit mediumship with those other historically distinct forms of spirit possession and traditions of spirit mediumship which have also occupied the religious landscape of modern Thailand during the twentieth century. In essence, I have argued that part of the contemporary dynamics animating the cultural meaning and social significance of Thai professional spirit mediumship is a product of its multifaceted, dialectical relations of relative identification with and distinction from those other forms of spirit possession and mediumship which have preceded it on the historical stage of Thai society and culture. These contrasting forms of spirit possession and mediumship, in other words, constitute a range of obvious social and symbolic reference points in relation to which contemporary professional spirit mediumship can be both defined and evaluated, by supporters and critics alike, as a more or less acceptable, meaningful or compelling form of religious practice and experience.

Whether any, all or just some of these other forms of possession or mediumship are actually utilized as reference points of comparison in any concrete act of evaluation, however, is socially, historically, and contextually contingent and highly variable. Not all of these forms of possession may exist as either meaningful, known or viable options of practice or experience within any given locale or historical period or among a particular group of individuals.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Hence, in my following synoptic outline of the contrasting meaning ascribed to these different forms of possession and mediumship by contemporary Bangkok professional mediums, I do not include the entertaining, playful form of possession that occurs, or at least used to occur, during the Thai new year festival of Songkran. No one in the Bangkok subculture of professional spirit mediums I spoke to ever mentioned this form of possession. In

Moreover, the particular interpretive and evaluative judgments resulting from any concrete act of comparison using this grammar are also somewhat contingent and variable, although not radically so. To the degree that all of these discrete configurations of practices and experiences are seen as sharing the common feature of “possession by a supramundane entity,” however, one can argue that in their complex permutations of opposition and similarity they constitute, in their totality, a nuanced and multifaceted grammar of family terms within Thai culture which can be – and often are – selectively drawn upon by those individuals, groups or institutions that seek to render meaningful any particular concrete experience or practice of spirit possession.

The indigenous Thai tradition of malevolent possession requiring exorcism constitutes a reference point of stark negative opposition from the perspective of contemporary Bangkok professional spirit mediums and their followers. Everything about it – from the identity of the possessing spirits and their reason for initiating possession, to the logics of ritual and communicative interaction with those spirits – stands in stark opposition to the positive moral and social self-understanding that professional mediums hold about themselves, and which they seek to convey more broadly to their followers, their clients and the general Thai public. Critics seeking to vilify professional spirit mediumship, however, can at times try to categorically conflate these two types of possession because they can safely presume that all Thais agree on the unambiguously negative value ascribed to malevolent possession.

The indigenous Thai tradition of possession by a communal tutelary or guardian spirit constitutes a reference point of muted opposition and ambivalent complementarity from the perspective of contemporary Bangkok professional spirit mediums and their followers. In the eyes of professional spirit mediums, possession by ancestral and guardian spirits typically seems

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this sense, then, it appears to have been an unknown and thus unmeaningful category within the Bangkok community’s comparative grammar for thinking about the cultural meaning and social value of spirit possession as practice and experience.

to be perceived as a rather marginal and insignificant affair of limited, local mundane concerns, involving possession by either morally ambiguous or relatively lowly spirits (*phi* and *jao*) that command only a modest degree of supramundane sacral power (*khlang* or *saksit*), merit and virtue (*bun barami*), and worldly influence (*itthiphon*). Such practices even seem a bit morally and religiously suspect in the eyes of professional spirit mediums who conceive of themselves, by contrast, as possessed by highly charismatic and elevated *jao* and *thep* that possess vast amounts of merit and virtue (*barami*) which, in turn, guarantees them extraordinary supramundane power (*aphinihan*) that they employ as protectors and supporters of both Buddhism and humanity more generally. These significant cosmological, moral and social differences from the perspective of professional spirit mediums, however, are not always recognized or accepted by those unfamiliar with the subculture of professional spirit mediums. Moreover, some critics look more favorably upon ancestral or guardian spirit mediums, disparaging professional mediums for what they consider to be inflated and deceptive claims about their grand moral status and the authority, or authenticity, of those spirits which possess them.

The indigenous Thai tradition of possession by an empowered teacher (*khru*) constitutes a reference point of strong identification from the perspective of contemporary Bangkok spirit mediums and their followers. Possession by an empowered teacher spirit during the annual *wai khru* ceremony represents a public moment of profound and unambiguous charismatic presence, religious authority and social influence for all mediums. As a public validation of their claim to supramundane authenticity and moral legitimacy, these moments also socially reconstitute the host medium as the preeminent source of dominant religious authority in relation to those other junior mediums who have undergone initiation into a lineage of authority under the host

medium's guidance. One suspects, in fact, that the folk Brahmanical ideology of the empowered teacher and the *wai khru* ceremony was originally so appealing to professionalizing spirit mediums precisely because the principle social and cultural value of these ideas and rituals – the production and transmission of efficaciously transformative knowledge and authority – is ultimately so dependent upon a successful experience of possession. Such a positive, if symbolically muted, normative evaluation of possession also likely enabled professionalizing spirit mediums to claim a privileged point of access into the domain of folk Brahmanism and all of the esoteric forms of knowledge it contained, despite their traditional exclusion from it.

The foreign-derived traditions of possession by a Chinese or Hindu deity constitute reference points of positive complementarity and even identification from the perspective of contemporary Bangkok professional spirit mediums and their followers. Given the contemporary taken-for-granted prominence of Chinese and Hindu deities as possessing spirits among Bangkok professional mediums, this attitude is not surprising. In general, the practice and experience of spirit possession within Thailand's Chinese and Hindu communities is typically regarded by Bangkok professional spirit mediums as comparable to, and for some perhaps even identical with, their own practice and experience – benevolent and virtuous deities possessing humans in order to serve and protect humanity. Accordingly, those annual religious festivals organized by Thailand's Chinese and Hindu communities which publicly valorize spirit possession are highly valued within the Bangkok subculture of professional mediums. Many mediums make a special effort to take part in these festivals to whatever degree they can, and they often include these events within their personal annual schedule of ritual obligations. In many ways, Bangkok's professional mediums treat public celebrations of Chinese and Hindu spirit possession as extensions of their own subcultural cycle of festivities and celebrations, regardless of the fact

that Chinese and Hindu religious officiants do not regard these festivals in this light and are even somewhat critical of the presence of professional mediums at those events.

Thai reflections upon the cultural meaning and social value of professional spirit possession and spirit mediumship, however, are not restricted to simply comparisons with other forms of practice and experience involving “possession by a supramundane entity.” Rather, the ideological and ritual complexity which defines the variegated field of contemporary Thai popular religiosity ensures that there are a wide range of other practitioners and techniques, beliefs and experiences against which the religious meaning and value of professional spirit mediumship is defined and evaluated, both by mediums themselves as well as followers, clients, critics and the public at large. Even more significantly, professional spirit mediums themselves repeatedly elaborate upon the meaning and value of their own practices and experiences through direct comparisons with the thaumaturgic practices, moral character and religious roles of *mau* and, especially, Buddhist monks.

The subcultural salience of these comparisons, however, are not surprising when one considers the broad range of historically unique claims about the character of spirit possession and mediumship that professional mediums have advanced in the post-World War II era – their possession by morally virtuous *thep* who support and protect Buddhism; their active endorsement of and approximation to a model of modestly devout lay Buddhist asceticism; their appropriation of the ideology of the empowered teacher and the *wai khru* ceremony as a model for confirming and transmitting esoteric knowledge and authority; their claims to competency with regards to an expanding range of thaumaturgically efficacious esoteric knowledges and therapeutic techniques; and their desire to organize their social relations with clients and

followers around a devotional ethos so that they more closely approximate the model of a religious authority and patron engaged in a full-time vocation.

In all of these ways, professional spirit mediums have consistently sought to refashion and reconceptualize their religious identity so that it more closely resembles the roles of *both* folk Brahmanical practitioners and Buddhist monks. Thus, they have sought to appropriate those forms of esoteric knowledge, ritual technique and collective ritual which are defining of practitioners like *mau*. Yet they also have sought to approximate the normative ethos, ascetic character, religious status, and occupational stability of *phra*. The end result of all these transformations has been that professional spirit mediums have consistently sought to redefine the very cultural meaning and social value ascribed to the practice and experience of spirit possession so that they can publicly claim that spirit mediumship is a legitimate, full-time Buddhist vocation and calling.<sup>77</sup> And through this very claim they have repeatedly challenged the general normative Buddhist vision, as conveyed in the academic literature, of what spirit possession is, who a spirit medium is, what sorts of activities spirit mediums are engaged in, and what religious and social benefits result from the activities of spirit mediums. However, there are in reality multiple normative visions of Buddhism at work in late-twentieth-century Thai Buddhism. Thus in order to fully appreciate the challenge posed by professional spirit mediums, one needs to map out these multiple visions of the Buddhist religious world. Because ultimately, none of these visions is particularly accommodating to the innovative self-understandings that

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<sup>77</sup> Wijeyewardene has also commented on this defining characteristic and presumption of professional spirit mediums: "Though mediums may appear to be like any other professional in the society, maintained by the services he or she performs for others, they themselves appear to see something more to their position. If they see themselves as what we may call professionals, they are not only professional healers, but exhibit a religious calling...Mediums do not, to the society at large, have any of the attributes of monks. But in their own view, they seem covertly to be challenging the status of monks and certainly consider themselves 'called'" (Wijeyewardene 1986: 184).



Bangkok professional spirit mediums have of themselves, and to varying degrees all of these visions impinge upon their daily social lives.

**CHAPTER THREE**  
**PROFESSIONAL SPIRIT MEDIUMS AMIDST THAI BUDDHIST REGIMES**  
**OF VALUE: ARTICULATIONS OF SUBORDINATION, REPUDIATION,**  
**EXCLUSION, AND INNOVATION**

**Envisioning Thai Buddhisms and Twentieth Century Thai Buddhist Regimes of Value**

In the prior chapter I spoke rather selectively about Thai Buddhism in either the singular or the plural. For a long time scholars found it relatively easy to refer to Thai Buddhism in the singular, whether as a substantive, empirical phenomenon or as a heuristic category of analysis. Given their disciplinary leanings this singularity typically referred to either a normative model derived from canonical scripture or a normative model derived from the empirical specificity of a field site. Or from some combination of these two sources. At the same time, as scholars looked further afield across historical eras and social domains, they were aware of the plural forms and traditions of Buddhism observable across cultural regions and even within just the territorial boundaries of the modern nation state of Thailand. As a result, they have employed a variety of axes of distinction and comparison to convey that diversity in general or with regards to a particular national tradition.

Changing scholarly presumptions that not only privilege the social reality of pluralism and the dynamics of localism (Braun 2009) but that also question the historical artificiality and contingency of the nation-state form as the taken for granted point of comparative reference have slowly undermined the willingness or ability of contemporary scholars to talk about Thai Buddhism in general or in the singular. Along with arguments about irreducible and irreconcilable diversity it has become more common for scholars to talk of Thai Buddhisms. In

this vein, Peter Jackson, critically reflecting back on his own past arguments, observes that:

“Thai religious culture in the 1990s is characterized by the coexistence of multiple conflicting trends. In the mid-1990s it is difficult to maintain that the forms of Buddhism adhered to by any particular socio-economic stratum of Thai society – working class, middle class, aristocracy – are integrated or united by a single discourse or set of ritual practices” (Jackson 2003: 290).

Taking seriously the idea of irreducible and irreconcilable diversity requires foundationally rethinking the social reality of Thai Buddhism as both a systemic social reality and as a resource for normative models of belief and action. I take it as axiomatic that Thai Theravada Buddhism – as an historical tradition, as a configuration of social practices, as an assemblage of institutions, as a set of stereotypic roles and identities, as a lineage of reified textual and ritual forms, as a formation of ideological beliefs and norms, as a collection of repertoires for interpretation and action – is too foundationally inchoate as an empirical reality to conform to any single, homogenous, coherent or totalizing model or representation. As an historical, social and cultural reality, Thai Buddhism is protean in its axiomatic diversity, ambiguity and contradictions, providing a wealth of relatively salient ideological, social and cultural resources for anyone seeking to claim precedent for and the legitimacy of their ideas or actions. With varying degrees of plausibility, most Thais can refer to imminent possibilities and potentialities, emergent sociocultural patterns and configurations, specific reified sociocultural forms or representations, or the self-consciously fashioned ideologies and practices of particular social groups or cultural institutions within Thai Buddhism to justify the authenticity, legitimacy and value of their religious claims. The truth of this axiomatic and protean inchoateness can be seen in the fact that it is not difficult to locate within the Pali canon in general, and the vernacular or practical canons by extension, scriptural justifications for diametrically opposed

interpretations of beliefs or activities regarding the same subject matter. Within Thai Buddhism, in other words, there exists no final, enduring, or definitive baseline of originary, foundationally shared consensus and agreement.

It remains the case, however, that Bangkok professional spirit medium, their followers, their clients, and all the other actors who take part in the subculture of professional spirit mediums or who comment on it from the outside make frequent reference to Buddhism in general or Thai Buddhism in particular when seeking to explain, clarify, interpret or judge the behavior and attitudes of those involved in the subculture. But exactly which forms, modalities or traditions of Buddhism they are referring to is not self-evident. In contrast to spatial, temporal or sociological distinctions, I argue that over the course of the last 150 years there has emerged in Thailand a series of relatively discrete religious regimes through which various actors and institutions have sought to imagine and organize – culturally, socially and politically – the general field of Thai religiosity, and most especially Buddhism. These religious regimes are historical social projects which seek to make and define religiosity in part by classifying, labeling, ranking and ascribing meaning to the heterogeneous complexity of actors, actions, objects and ideologies present within the religious field. In addition, they seek to make and define religiosity by making differential judgments regarding the relative authenticity, legitimacy and authority of these various actors, actions, objects and ideologies. Finally, to some degree or other, all of these religious regimes also draw boundaries around and between these actors, actions, objects and ideologies with reference to a particular conception of Buddhism as a collection of propositional – even doctrinal – beliefs and values, institutional forms and authorities, normative standards of interpretation and action, stereotypic forms of practice and behavior, and valued goals and intentionalities.

These religious regimes have been unevenly and imperfectly instantiated across the social and geographical landscape of modern Thailand since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but I argue that each of them is culturally meaningful, socially salient and pragmatically deployed – to varying degrees and intensity – by both the members of the Bangkok subculture of professional spirit mediums and those beyond it who comment upon it. However, each religious regime has distinct implications for conceptualizing and practicing both possession and mediumship, as well as the various cultural practices, forms of sociality, modalities of experience and ideological claims advanced by those engaged in or with possession and mediumship. The very character and definition of spirit possession and mediumship within the subculture shifts as one moves between different religious regimes and the values and worldview they presume.

Inductively discerned, in part, through attending to the statements and narratives I encountered in the field, therefore, I argue that there are at least three religious regimes of value in contemporary Buddhist Thailand that are employed to frame and make sense of the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums. I label these three regimes inclusive syncretic Buddhism, modernist reform Buddhism and establishment state Buddhism. To differing degrees, each can be associated with particular historical developments and even the activities of particular social actors and institutions. I explore these three religious regimes, and their consequences for understanding Bangkok professional spirit mediums, in the rest of the chapter. First, I provide an ethnographic description of three different occasions of the same ritual – a forest robe donation – within which one can discern these three religious regimes of value and their ability to shape both the actions of mediums and their followers as well as individuals from outside the subculture interacting with them. Next I discuss each religious regime in turn, first outlining the structure of value and interpretive worldview conveyed by the regime and then

exploring its role and significance within different occasions of the forest robe donations. I conclude the chapter with some comparative reflections upon the differential capacity of Bangkok professional spirit mediums to find validation for their own religious self-understandings and vocation within these different visions of Thai Buddhism as a frame and source of religious meaning and value.

### **Tales of Forest Robe Donations: Professional Spirit Mediums Betwixt and Between Thai Buddhist Regimes of Value**

*Forest Robe Donation 1.* Around nine in the morning on a hot day in late July 1996, our small caravan of pickup trucks arrive at a small rural temple outside a mid-sized town in Chumphon province. As the two professional spirit mediums and the half dozen or so disciples belonging to their joint entourage exit the cars, they quickly walk, money tree in hand, towards the newly finished shrine to King Chulalongkorn that will soon be officially consecrated. Several hundred people are congregated throughout the temple grounds, principally under temporary tents and the shade of the large tree before Rama V's shrine as well as inside the main congregation hall next to the shrine. Our contribution to this forest robe donation ceremony (*phithi thaut pha pa*) is placed on a long table filled with many other money trees at which laity are formally recording all the donations. As the separate table of consecratory ritual offerings before the new shrine is being finalized, the senior medium in our entourage, Sam, picks up a microphone and begins taking on the function of a supporting host, which is in addition to his other role as a Bangkok medium of Jao Mae Kuan Im who has helped to sponsor this occasion of merit making in a small, downtrodden rural Buddhist temple. For the next two and a half hours he will help lead, officiate, and orchestrate a thoroughly mainstream Buddhist merit making

ceremony that unites monks, mediums, Brahmins and laity in the common cause of supporting and ensuring the prosperity of Buddhism.<sup>78</sup>

As the ritual preparations are being finalized, the disparate crowd is milling about in an unfocused manner, the sound system is loud and filled with static, temple goers are stapling currency into aesthetically inventive arboreal forms, and men with video cameras are wandering through the temple recording the day's ceremony. Sam oscillates between providing advice on the ritual preparations, cultivating interest in the crowd for the consecration ceremony soon to begin, and in a self-promotional manner inviting the crowd to participate in yet a second forest robe donation he has organized for later in the day at another nearby temple. Repeatedly throughout the consecration ceremony he will invite the audience to participate in that second robe donation ceremony as well. Eventually the ceremonial hosting is shared jointly by Sam and a Brahmin priest hired for the occasion, with the sponsor of the Chulalongkorn shrine acting as primarily a silent third presence alongside them. Sam is not dressed in the dramatic ritual attire of a Chinese god, or any other possessing deity, on this morning. Instead, he is wearing a smart, all-white casual suit, indicating his public persona on this occasion as a Brahman-like ritual specialist and official rather than a professional medium.

Just before the consecration ceremony formally begins, a female professional medium of Chulalongkorn, already in a state of possession, enters the scene and offers donations and a blessing before the shrine. She is followed in turn by the sponsor who also presents a set of ritual offerings. The medium then takes up a prominent seat as a special ritual guest flanked by her

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<sup>78</sup> *Thaut pha pa*, or forest robe donations, references Pali canonical traditions in which monks 'find' discarded robes donated by the laity. In contemporary Central Thailand, it refers to the collection of money from a diverse set of laypersons which is then donated to a temple. The funds are primarily understood to be used for temple construction and development projects. Some of the currency donated is aesthetically fashioned into "wishing trees." Forest robe donations can happen at any time of the year and are often envisioned as a means by which wealthy communities or temples can assist less well off communities and temples.

own attendants, and Sam invites those witnessing the event to seek consultations (*khao fao*) with her, although no one initially takes up the suggestion. Despite the many exhortations broadcast over the sound system from Sam and the Brahmin about the meritorious value of supporting Buddhism during the previous half hour, the reality of this particular consecration ceremony has only recently settled into the consciousness of the crowd that has gathered early in the morning for the full day of ritual celebrations at the temple. But as the Brahmin proceeds to expound in detail the ritual logic of the ceremony to come, a crowd slowly begins to gather under the tent and in the chairs beyond it, while a few middle-aged women approach and kneel at the feet of the medium for advice. As another professional medium possessed by Royal Father arrives at the shrine, offers a blessing, and then is seated as well before the shrine but on the other side of the table of ritual offerings, assistants to Sam move through the crowd with large platters of yellow and white flower petals into which observers are invited to make donations. Five policemen in full uniform show up and are given pride of place on the ritual stage in a new line of chairs set up just for them.

Signaling that the ceremony proper is soon to begin, the abbot of the temple and four other monks arrive at the shrine and are seated directly in front of it. In their wake, the audience grows exponentially very quickly, and in a swift and efficient manner the abbot is invited by the Brahmin to light a consecratory candle before the shrine and to then lead all the monks in briefly chanting some auspicious verses (*khatha*) for the occasion. The attention of all in the audience is immediately seized, and their hands rise in unison into a wai of respect and devotion. In a minute or two the monks have finished chanting, which is marked by the Brahmin blowing a conch shell three times, at which point all of the monks promptly and silently exit the scene. Now the consecration ceremony proper begins, with the Brahmin – projecting his words of guidance over



the sound system – leading the assembled crowd in taking the three refuges in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. This is followed in turn by playing a tape of the royal anthem of King Bhumipol.

In the ritual script of the next 45 minutes or so, the Brahmin oscillates between chanting a variety of auspicious prayers read from a ritual manual and providing explanatory clarifications to a slowly shrinking audience composed primarily of women. Amidst these prayers and the accompanying auditory flourishes of drums, bells and conch shells, various gods and divinities are repeatedly invited down to bear witness and to offer their blessings to this consecration ceremony. At the same time, audience members in a slow trickle approach the medium of Chulalongkorn in order to receive advice and blessings, although none approach the other medium. Occasionally the shrine sponsor makes additional ritual offerings before the shrine's multiple statues of Rama the Fifth. Yet despite the ritual spectacle, audience members increasingly drift over to the main congregational hall in which many monks are gathering for the large alms donation ceremony that will occur before noon. And once the sound of their chanting echoes through the random silences between the numerous prayers of the consecration ceremony, the defections increase. From a maximum of 225 audience members early on at the beginning of the consecration ceremony, the number drops progressively until by the end only 75 individuals remain in the audience.

A burst of loud ritual exhortations and prayers marks the end of the ceremony along with the raucous sound of exploding firecrackers, at which point the policemen get up to leave as does most of the crowd. The crowd that lingers though is witness to six female chatri style dancers, brought to the temple by Sam, performing a series of devotional dance offerings intended to entertain and honor the gods in attendance. Upon completion they are directed by Sam to show

their respects to the still-present medium of Chulalongkorn after first offering their own prayers of respect to the spirit of Chulalongkorn symbolized by the shrine. As the royal anthem of King Bhumipol signals the close of the ceremony, the crowd dissipates even further. A sizeable cluster of more than twenty people, however, now congregates around the medium of Chulalongkorn, seeking an audience. Memorial photos of the sponsor, the Brahmin, Sam, various assistants and the second attendant medium standing respectfully before the new shrine occur simultaneously. Stepping into the center of the shrinking ritual stage and the dwindling audience, the medium for Chulalongkorn uses the microphone to offer up a brief homily and prayer on everyone's behalf while the medium of Royal Father tosses money infused flower petals into the remaining audience, causing the curious and lingering children and adults in attendance to playfully jostle with each other for the blessed offerings. Sam offers a final invitation to those in earshot to join him at the other forest robe donation ceremony soon to start elsewhere, even as the ritual event unceremoniously unwinds. In a few minutes, Sam and his entourage are back in their cars, exiting the temple which echoes with the sounds of dozens and dozens of monks in the central congregation hall chanting out auspicious prayers over the temple's sound system.

*Forest Robe Donation 2.* Less than an hour later on that same day in July we are at Wat Tonwikul, another small temple on the edge of the same mid-sized town in Chumphon province. This temple is the location of a 12 meter high statue of Jao Mae Kuan Im that Sam has been building in stages for some time. He initiated the project several years ago, has been collecting donations in Bangkok and elsewhere to finance its building since then, and sponsored today's robe donation ceremony to the temple in part to show his support for the local congregation and to solicit additional donations on behalf of his project. The temple's principal ceremonial hall is filled with the core members of Sam's entourage who have travelled down from Bangkok the

night before and who at present are arranging the ritual stage for the ceremony soon to start. Soft cushion chairs for the main ritual actors are set up, ritual offerings are laid out, and monetary contributions are being accounted for even as currency is stapled into long chains that are hung from a potted banana tree at the center of the ritual stage in the center of the congregational hall.

Sam has changed into a gaudy, bright red and white sequined outfit befitting a spirit medium, indicating the different ritual persona he will occupy in the soon to begin forest robe donation ceremony at this temple. After making an offering to the Buddha statues located at the back of the hall, he proceeds to invite Jao Mae Kuan Im down to possess him. Subsequently taking a seat on one of the chairs, he is promptly flanked by two of his disciples who attend to any and all of the deity's requests or commands. In time Sam is joined in the hall by the mediums of Chulalongkorn and Royal Father who took part in the consecration ceremony earlier that same morning at the other local temple. The Brahmin and assistants who also took part in that ceremony arrive in due course as well, and eventually even a few small clusters of laity from the prior robe donation also show up. The audience for this robe donation ceremony, however, is much smaller. It numbers less than seventy at its height, and is composed mostly of regular temple goers, locals who live nearby, and the members of Sam's Bangkok entourage and the entourages of the other mediums in attendance.

Prior to the ceremony proper, Sam, the guest mediums, the Brahmin and the abbot of Wat Tonwikul gather outside under a tent in front of the still under construction statue of Jao Mae Kuan Im. Pong, the junior medium in Sam's abode, acts as the ritual officiant for the occasion but does not become possessed. Sam leads a series of auspicious offerings intended to bless the statue. Entourage members chant auspicious verses and sing devotional songs. Various offerings are formally presented and blessed at temporary tables set up at the base of the statue. The same

half dozen female chatri dancers present at the earlier consecration ceremony perform various honorific and devotional dances in the large open space in front of the statue. A series of speakers – first Pong, next Noi (a local medium who considers Sam a mentor), and finally Sam – recount in some detail to all in attendance the history of the building project, the unparalleled beauty of the statue, the auspicious value in completing the statue for the local community, the local temple and all Buddhists, and the great merit that will be gained by everyone who participates in the project. A long litany of specific donors is respectfully thanked, and Sam ends his closing brief speech by wishing progress, wealth, good fortune and prosperity on all in attendance. During all of these invocations of good will and the memorializing photos that follow, Sam and his entourage is center stage, with the other guest mediums and local community members included only tangentially. The Brahmin and abbot are silent witnesses on the margins of activity.

Back inside the hall, the robe donation ceremony proper begins. Sam and the medium of Chulalongkorn sit on one side of the banana tree and offerings, while the abbot sits on the other side. Five additional monks who enter the hall a bit later are seated in a line behind the table of ritual offerings. The audience, mostly dressed in white, is seated on mats on the floor facing the mediums and the monks. The abbot guides the ritual activity that follows, beginning with the obligatory prostrations and taking of precepts. The ceremony is simple and brief. After chanting some general prayers, the abbot steps off his chair, kneels down to take hold of the money tree which symbolizes all the offerings being presented, and then formally receives the donations from the laity. All of the monks then collectively chant protective blessings on behalf of all the donors, and upon completing this task they exit the congregational hall.

Throughout this brief ceremony Sam and the medium of Chulalongkorn are passive observers, and in fact rarely if at all take part in the formal acts of deferential participation and veneration displayed by the rest of the laity in the audience. Their benevolent impassivity ends however after the monks leave center stage. Sam promptly stands up and begins tossing blessed coins (*ngoern mongkhon*) into the audience, causing a scramble. As locals being queuing up for consultations with both of the mediums, assistants to Sam begin to systematically announce over the temple's loud speaker system each of the donors to the ceremony and how much money they offered. The consultations with the mediums are brief and unelaborated. Individuals kneel down and wai before the seated mediums who in turn reach down to either grasp the shoulders of the semi-prostrate persons before them or to lay their hands on their heads. The mediums, in their possessed states, then softly recite spells and prayers over them, sometimes dramatically blowing breaths of auspiciousness over them. As the mediums provide blessings and consultations over the next thirty or so minutes, the money trees are dismembered and the long list of donors is systematically read out for all to hear. Once the queue for Sam ends, he proceeds to the back of the hall in order to discretely dispossess out of sight, while the medium of Chulalongkorn continues to provide consultations, adding flourishes along the way such as signing 100 baht bank notes and presenting them as blessed offerings.

Very quickly Sam, now the very human leader of an entourage, advises his followers and disciples that they should gather their possessions together as cars will be heading back to Bangkok soon although he will be staying on in the area for several days. After collecting their things and eating a brief meal, the Bangkok entourage members head outside and over to the tables of offerings before the 12 meter high statue of Jao Mae Kuan Im. They begin dividing up the food offerings of fresh fruit and Chinese dough buns as spiritually blessed bounty to take

home with them. By 3pm they are bundling themselves into cars at about the same time that the medium of Chulalongkorn and her followers are heading to their cars as well. The long car trip back to Bangkok is filled with multiple, repeated recounting of the day's events as well as commentary and gossip. The odd questions and behavior of Chumphon locals who do not seem to know much about mediums, gods (*thep*) or Jao Mae Kuan Im are a rich topic of amused discussion, as is the exemplary persona of the Brahmin official and the apparently boastful behavior of the local abbot whose personal and administrative faults in the statue building project are recounted in livid detail. Although occasionally interjected in dramatic ways into the local religious life of the temple and its surrounding community, it is obvious to all nonetheless that Sam and his entourage live in an ultimately rather distinct social and religious world.

*Forest Robe Donation 3.* It is early on the morning of August 12, 1998 and we are back at Wat Tonwikul. Sam has organized another forest robe donation in order to support the temple which hosts his project to build the largest statue of Jao Mae Kuan Im in Chumphon province and, according to him, all of the upper north of the southern region. The statue is now virtually complete, and Sam has been residing at the temple for several months as a monk. Earlier in the year on a religious tour of Hong Kong he had prayed to Jao Mae Kuan Im that if he received robes from the hands of the Supreme Patriarch of the Thai Sangha, he would temporarily ordain for a single Lenten season. This turn of events is what indeed happened subsequently, and so he is now a Thammayut monk who calls himself the *luksit* (disciple) of the Supreme Patriarch and has been residing in Chumphon having received special permission to relocate there for the duration of the rainy season. Although the isolation and solitude better allows him to practice his monastic discipline, it also leaves him a bit frustrated and bored as well. More importantly though, it has allowed him to manage local affairs as he prepared for today's forest robe donation

which also doubles as well, given the date, as an occasion to honor Thailand's Queen Mother on her birthday. While wearing the robes of a Buddhist monk, Sam asserts that he cannot become possessed because the moral virtue of monks is greater than that of the gods. Moreover, deities do not bother (*mai yung*) monks, and they respect and are glad for those who wear the saffron robe and practice monastic discipline. Jao Mae Kuan Im, and other deities, however, can communicate with Sam in his dreams, and he can seek to communicate with them through the technique of sitting in meditation (*nang samathi*) and entering states of meditative absorption.

In contrast to the robe donation ceremonies organized by Sam two years ago, on this occasion no professional spirit mediums will be taking part. Prior to the ceremony it was explained to me that Sam will be leading the monastic delegation, while local civil servants will be leading the lay congregation. In the weeks and months prior to the ceremony, Sam supplemented his responsibilities as a temporary monk with various efforts to ensure that the robe donation is a success. He has coordinated the purchase of supplies, visited local abbots and temples to drum up support and extend invitations, hired trucks to drive around the area advertising the event, and closely managed the variety of preparations necessary for the large and extravagant affair he has planned. Several hundred monks I am told have been invited to receive alms and to be fed on the morning of the ceremony, and even more laity are expected to take part over the course of the full day.

A caravan of cars and vans filled with two dozen or so entourage members arrives at 6am on the morning of the ceremony, having driven overnight from Bangkok. Chinese devotional music is already playing over the temple sound system, echoing across a still mostly empty temple compound. The space in front of the Jao Mae Kuan Im statue is dotted with tents under which sit almost fifty tables seating eight persons each, and one large extended table of

ceremonial offerings rests at the base of the statue and in the shadow of a small Buddha statue and a large portrait of Thailand's Queen set up behind it. Above all of this and slightly obscured by the early morning mist stands the tall statue of Jao Mae Kuan Im. The congregation hall is filled with devotees, mostly women, dressed in white. Slowly they trickle out to take care of personal matters or to help arrange the accommodations for the future guests or the various ritual offerings.

By 7am Sam has welcomed over the sound system his entourage from Bangkok and briefly described the day's events for all in earshot. A local school teacher who will serve as one of the lay ceremonial officiants follows him. He also provides an overview of the day's upcoming activities and then launches into a history of the temple, an account of the long effort to build the statue, and a description of the various overlooked places of touristic interest in the local region. Sam rests under a tent before the statue receiving a steady stream of guests, followers and visitors as they slowly arrive, while the school teacher circles around to describe the upcoming day's calendar of events yet again while tossing in practical asides such as where the temple's bathrooms are located.

Eventually the first brief ceremonial business of the day arrives: the vow to observe eight precepts (*rap sin phram*) for the next twenty-four hours. Almost one hundred women dressed in white take this vow in the main congregation hall under the guidance of a monk from Surat Thani who has been invited to the day's events especially for this purpose. After the brief ritual, the monk offers up a homily which reiterates the moral significance of observing basic but extended monastic rules as well as the importance of the advanced renunciatory path that everyone has dedicated themselves to for the next day. Later, as everyone waits for the next event to begin, I overhear a conversation the Surat Thani monk is having with another local



monk. He is openly criticizing in a dismissive tone Mahayana Buddhism and Jao Mae Kuan Im, and then begins an extended diatribe about spirits (*phi*) and spirit possession (*song jao khao phi*). Turning to me especially amidst the small gathering of people around him, he slips into a lecture explicating how nothing of Buddhism is left in the Mahayana and details the evolutionary progression of religious thought from spirit cults to Brahmanism to Buddhism, lamenting in the process how the Buddha's teachings have been corrupted over time.

The conversation is cut short though as outside the local president of the district municipal council officially begins the forest robe donation ceremony by launching into a laudatory but rather general description of the building of the Jao Mae Kuan Im statue and its value to the city and local region. The official weaves the story of the statue into a celebration of local cultural heritage and an exemplification of regional religious traditions. Sam then takes over the microphone and expresses his pleasure at the day's events and all the local support he has received in his efforts. Sam is followed in turn by a prominent lawyer and local conservation official who expounds on the great benefits of eating healthy, avoiding meat and participating in environmental conservation efforts like the releasing of fish and planting of trees which will soon occur. At which point as if on cue, large numbers of participants turn to these very merit making efforts, first releasing hundreds of fish into the stream running alongside the temple and then proceeding to plant a half dozen saplings in the temple grounds. All of these activities, in addition to much of the rest of the morning's events, are video recorded by a stringer for a local television station.

As lay ritual leaders proceed to invite more donations over the loud speaker, the piles of existing currency are stapled into long flowing streamers of currency that rain down from the central offering table and banana tree placed before the Jao Mae Kuan Im statue. Yet another

local official takes over officiating duties, expounding even more about the local history and achievements of the monastery – ranging from the building of roads to the support provided to those in need – and the uniqueness, cost, and future fame of the Jao Mae Kuan Im statue which, he adds, still requires additional donations if it is to be completed properly. In time, almost one hundred monks arrive at the temple and are seated so that the laity can then formally offer the second and final meal of the day to them, after which the laity themselves eat lunch. As the invited monks chat casually after the meal or begin to leave, Sam steps up to the microphone and begins an extended talk directed at any monks who are lingering as well as the almost two hundred laypersons also present. Perspiring under the sun in his saffron robes, he recounts his personal history and background, including his miraculous encounter with Jao Mae Kuan Im when he was young and his history of service to her. He explains who she is, and describes in detail the trial and tribulations he encountered in the building of the statue as well as the numerous sacrifices made by himself, his entourage and the local people of this town in committing to the project. And he offers up numerous miraculous tales of protection and benefit that the statue has already bestowed upon the local community.

Upon the completion of his long account, the brief, formal forest robe ceremony commences. The abbot of the temple across the river accepts the donations on behalf of Wat Tonwikul, which is currently without a permanent abbot, and he then proceeds to bless all present that they may benefit from the virtuous rewards of their meritorious actions. Before everyone slips away, however, Sam makes sure to formally invite everyone back to the temple in the evening to partake in entertainment and religious chanting. Many of the eight preceptors in white wander back to the main congregation hall to avoid the noon day sun, while Chinese devotional music perpetually echoes across the local landscape for the rest of the afternoon.

By late afternoon a portable movie screen, in temple fair fashion, is being set up in the open ground in front of the congregation hall even as eight vow preceptors and others slowly gather themselves on mats on the ground in front of the Jao Mae Kuan Im statue. After making offerings of flowers, candles and incense, the temporary lay renunciants and others who have joined them launch into a series of general prayers and chants under the guidance of the monk from Surat Thani. This special guest, in association with a half dozen other monks who are lined up at the front of the assembled participants, guides the lay audience in chanting from a small ritual manual filled with a variety of different generic prayers and chants. After thirty minutes the Surat Thani monk winds up this devotional activity and proceeds to provide basic, streamlined directions in the practice of meditation. He then leads everyone present in a very brief guided but silent meditation lasting barely five minutes. By now dusk has thoroughly settled in, the sky is turning a dark blue and black, and the background noises of small town life has settled down into cicadas and the occasional blaring automobile horn. Given the quiet and lull in activity, the monk from Surat Thani takes the opportunity to begin a sermon.

Long and rambling, it is nonetheless oriented around the three meanings of “mother,” an appropriate focus because today is not only the birthday of the reigning Queen but also Thailand’s official Mother’s Day. He expounds at length on three types of mothers and one’s moral obligations to them – one’s personal mother who raised you, the Queen mother who protects all the citizens of Thailand, and Jao Mae, the divine mother, that mythical mother who cares for humanity. Although presumably even toned and laudatory, throughout the talk the monk introduces subtle but pointed criticisms of spirit mediums, magical practices and the pointless desire – which runs against the grain of the Buddha’s teachings to rely only upon oneself, he frequently reiterates – of dependently seeking aid from questionable supramundane

entities such as gods (*thep*) and lords (*jao*). Unable to hold his tongue once the monk finishes his exposition, Sam takes up the microphone in turn and launches into an extended accounting of the miraculous feats of Jao Mae Kuan Im, of her benevolent and virtuous service to mankind and Buddhism, of how unfortunate it is that so many misunderstand her mission, and of the depths of her virtuous merit and charisma (*bun barami*).

In the awkward wake of the obliquely dueling sermons just offered, the assembled congregation gathers itself together in order to collectively circumambulate in devotional respect (*wian thian*) the statue of Jao Mae Kuan Im. With everyone present holding three candles, sticks of incense, and long lotus flowers stalks, and after having received rather perfunctory instruction in the chanting of Chinese language prayers, the laity file up the stairs, light their candles and incense and proceed to circle the statue inside the wall surrounding it. Circling the statue three times with Pong leading them and other entourage members chanting “Om Mani Padme Hum,” the sound system blares out a royal anthem that honors the Queen.

Once everyone has assembled back on the mats under the tent, Sam introduces another monk who arrived at the temple earlier during the sermon by the monk from Surat Thani. Taking up a formal seat at the front of the congregation, this second monk proceeds to deliver a twenty minute sermon about his miraculous personal experiences with Jao Mae Kuan Im. In particular, he recounts in considerable detail how she healed him of various afflictions and health problems over the years. The monk from Surat Thani sits stone faced off to the side in the shadows. Sam sits to the other side of the sermonizing monk with a mild, joyful smile of appreciation on his face. Once the monk finishes his sermon, the mood shifts quickly into a temple fair mode, as a string of movies light up the open courtyard of the temple and portable food stalls snap into business. Temporary renunciants clean up the tables, chat among themselves or watch selections

of the movies. The monks sit together under the tent and chat among themselves for some time, although Sam and the Surat Thani monk never say a word to each other the rest of the evening. In fact, over the course of the day I have hardly witnessed them speaking to each other except with the most perfunctory of necessary formalities.

Early the next morning, after the monks have gone out for their daily alms round, eaten their first meal of the day and taken care of the usual early morning daily affairs of temple, the temporary renunciants in white gather in the congregation hall to formally give up their eight renunciatory vows. Before doing so however, the monk from Surat Thani slips into a pedagogical discussion of proper religious practice, including such basic matters as how to prostrate properly. He then shifts into a more general discussion of Buddhist teachings which in turn develops into a pointed criticism of non-Theravada religious practices and spirit possession. Agitation and whispering spreads among elements of the assembled audience, particularly members of Sam's entourage. The monk interrupts his sermon to lead the temporary renunciants in formally giving up their exemplary number of vows, but then promptly returns to his criticism of devotion to gods, spirit possession and other practices he sees as unbefitting of proper Theravada Buddhists.<sup>79</sup>

When during his talk Sam enters the hall, the monk abruptly ends his sermon and turns the floor over to Sam, who begins to talk yet again about his religious work and his life of devoted service and calling. He expounds upon why this calling means he cannot remain a monk beyond the Lenten season and he expresses disappointment with those who have a narrow view

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<sup>79</sup> As Skilling et. al. (2012) makes clear, the use of "Theravada" as a general sectarian label of self-identification among Buddhist communities and practitioners in Southeast and Southern Asia is a relatively recent development. It has only been widely employed since the mid-twentieth century. By the 1990s, however, it was relatively common to hear or read of its use by Thai monks and others educated along the lines of the modern historiography of Buddhism in Asia, which unselfconsciously employs the sectarian triad of "Theravada," "Mahayana," and "Vajrayana." Bangkok professional spirit mediums who had educated themselves about the mythologies and histories of the Chinese and Hindu gods that possessed them were often familiar with these sectarian labels as well.

of religious practice and do not understand the diversity of religious practices prevalent throughout the Buddhist world. He concludes by explaining that he hopes he will be able to return to Wat Tonwikul each year with donations of support and that everyone present will also be able to return year after year in support of the temple as well.

Although it feels like the laudatory closing of a merit-making event, the Surat Thani monk however prominently takes center stage again. He frames the morning's event as a seminar of sorts and asks for participants to make brief statements of their opinions in light of the contrasting perspectives presented. First though, he launches into an extended and pointed diatribe about the currently depressing state of Thai Buddhism, about the useless practices like excessive donations to temples that reveals an ignorance of authentic Buddhist principles, and about the misleading beliefs in supernatural powers such as spirit possession. He explains to the audience that it is important to correctly understand Buddhism and to correctly communicate such understanding to foreigners so that they do not in turn spread incorrect ideas about Thai Buddhism to the rest of the world. Audience members increasingly turn to look at me as the monk explains his concerns, and I in turn feel incredibly uncomfortable at how I have been interjected into the debate and somewhat aghast at how perhaps I have provoked unintentionally this confrontation by my presence. Sitting at the front of the audience and across from the Surat Thani monk, Sam says nothing more however and maintains instead a mild, but seemingly forced, public relations smile of beatific composure.

Only a few people even hesitatingly speak up, and much of what they say is indirect and only obliquely addresses the differences at hand. Bland generalizations about tolerance, diversity and freedom of individual thought are shared. Few seem willing or able to reframe a congregation hall into a debating society, or to take up a rhetoric of debate and counterarguments

more suited perhaps, at best, to a lecture hall or a current affairs television show. After the moment passes and the memorial photos of Sam surrounded by all of the former renunciants have been snapped in front of the Jao Mae Kuan Im statue outside, the morning's lay ritual leader wanders up to me and tries to clarify for my benefit that the Surat Thani monk used to be a military officer and thus speaks both more directly and more critically than the average monk. Moreover, the lay leader asserts that he was not really as disparaging as I might have misunderstood, although it is not clear to me what rhetorical flourishes I misunderstood. Members of Sam's entourage are less conciliatory or apologetic in their later comments on the conflicting perspectives and pointed words in the congregation hall and over the course of the past day. They frame it primarily however as a sectarian affair, a difference of opinion between Theravada and Mahayana, or between an overly strict Thammayut monk and other more accommodating perspectives. They even chalk up the Surat Thani monk's continued criticisms as an effort to entice followers of one religious leader into the camp of another. They do not mention anything about his criticism of spirit possession per se, but Sam's mother mentions that she was so uncomfortable by the confrontational affair that morning that she wanted to leave the hall and take a piss. Others mention with pride that although the monk kept trying to provoke an argument, no one was willing to indulge him. On the long ride back to Bangkok later that afternoon the mood is unusually subdued and quiet, with a minimum of the usual jocular retelling of recent events or critical backstage commentary about the personalities and behavior of recent fellow ceremonial participants.

### **Inclusive Syncretic Buddhism and Bangkok Professional Spirit Mediums**

When speaking to Thais in Bangkok about Buddhism, many are quite aware of the empirically complex heterogeneity of religious actors, actions, goals and practices embraced under the broad umbrella of “religion” or “Buddhism.” Among the more knowledgeable there is also an awareness that for some not all of this heterogeneity is equally deserving of being labeled “Buddhist.” Those with advanced levels of formal education or familiar with scholarly or journalistic writings about the history of Thai Buddhism sometimes make reference to distinct elements or layers within Thai religiosity, and if they do so they might distinguish these as “Buddhism,” “Brahmanism” and “spirit cults” / “religion of spirits” ( *sasana phi*). Such distinct elements are frequently discussed as sequential historical layers folded into each other over time in the course of Thai history. Regardless of the particular language or metaphors used, there is a common interpretation among residents of Bangkok that Thai Buddhism inclusively and tolerantly contains within itself a complex diversity of religious forms, although some of those are more or less central to or in accordance with authentic Buddhist teachings, values and practices. Spirit possession and spirit mediumship is typically seen as loosely resting within the outer boundaries of that milieu of complex diversity and as more tangentially related to foundational Buddhist principles than other elements.

Such ideas are broadly shared as well by many scholars of Thai Buddhism. Most of these scholars envision Theravada Buddhism to have arrived in mainland Southeast Asia as a dominant cultural force in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. As a missionary religion of monastic renunciants, it is believed that it was then adopted by numerous political elites in the region’s courtly centers of power who were seeking a universalizing ideology that would better legitimate their social and political dominance. The classical view of a Buddhist king as a universal monarch who protected the Dharma and spread the morally transformative teachings of



the Buddha served, better than more localized and territorially demarcated indigenous spirit cults, to legitimate any given monarch's claim to not only pre-eminent political status over rival competitors but also those accompanying expansive rights of suzerainty and privileged control over patronage and material resources which flowed from such claims. More significant from the perspective of this study, however, was the transformation of Theravada Buddhism over the subsequent centuries into the religion of a rice-growing peasant society, such that the tradition became a more diverse and encompassing religion that answered the particular needs of peasant agriculturalists as well as monks, merchants and monarchs.<sup>80</sup>

As most historians of Theravada Buddhism recognize, the Buddhist traditions that were carried to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia by merchants and missionizing monks were already complex amalgams which combined cosmological ideas, moral values, ritual techniques and social roles drawn from the multiple Buddhist, Brahmanical and indigenous (sometimes more controversially identified as "animistic") religious traditions found in India.<sup>81</sup> This complexity

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<sup>80</sup> Keyes argues that the key to this transformation was "a distinctive pattern of domestication of the *sangha*" through which temporary membership in the Sangha came to be envisioned as a necessary part of the life cycle of all males, thus expanding the monastic career into a truly popular role rather than merely one restricted to segments of the elite (Keyes 1987: 134).

<sup>81</sup> Gombrich may be historically correct when he asserts that the historical Buddha "preached a pure soteriology" and that "he did not focus on the problems of life in this world" (Gombrich 1997: 168) given that his main concern was helping individuals to achieve a transcendent liberation from the mundane world of samsara and rebirth. The question of relative focus in the second quotation above, however, implicitly moderates any notion of the Buddha's message as a "pure" soteriology. Gombrich's own analysis of Pali textual sources indicates that even the early Pali canon of the Theravada tradition (1997: 174-180) recognizes that the historical Buddha was involved with formulating thaumaturgic responses to mundane worldly problems unrelated to liberatory salvation, although clearly these responses were seen as subordinate to soteriological issues and not a focus of detailed ideological or ritual elaboration. Nonetheless, Gombrich also recognizes that as a historical social phenomenon Theravada Buddhism as a religion of more than just monastic renunciants has had to concern itself with the problems of mundane life and the non-soteriological, and thus "this lack of interest in the needs of worldly life means that traditional Buddhism has always and everywhere been accretive" (1997: 168). In this sense, then, Gombrich as an historian of religion essentially agrees with most anthropological assessments of the doctrinal, ritual and social complexity found within classical and contemporary Theravada Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia, and that much of this complexity has been achieved through the absorption of historically distinct religious traditions that do not necessarily share canonical Theravada Buddhism's conceptualization of or hierarchical distinction between soteriology and thaumaturgy. However, unlike most anthropologists Gombrich is also committed to a more textualist vision of theological orthodoxy which leads him to more easily assert that certain contemporary beliefs and practices – such as the positive evaluation and celebration of possession experiences – are syncretic deviations signaling the

persisted and was further elaborated upon outside India, such that the various doctrinal teachings, monastic lineages, popular beliefs, and ritual practices which eventually arrived in Thailand via the mediation of Sri Lankan and Burmese Theravada Buddhism were already heterogeneous and complexly articulated prior to their subsequent further rearticulation within the pre-existing religious environment of post-twelfth-century Thailand.<sup>82</sup> In this sense, any vision of a pure or uncontaminated historical Buddhism was primarily a nineteenth- and twentieth-century product of Western scholars focusing exclusively on the Pali literary canon as definitive of the Theravada Buddhist religious tradition. These scholars in turn, however, subsequently passed such a vision of pure, authentic, original Buddhism on to numerous Western-educated or -influenced Thai monastic and lay interpreters of the Theravada tradition as well as subsequent Western scholars who studied Thai Theravada Buddhism.<sup>83</sup>

*Scholarly debates over Thai religious complexity and syncretism.* Anthropologists of Theravada Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia have, nonetheless, engaged in long, complicated and somewhat inconclusive debates about how to understand the particular character of this amalgamated religious complexity which they encountered in their field sites in

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“breakdown of traditional Buddhism” (1997: 174). This concern with deviations from and incoherence within the traditional cosmological, ritual and social logics of contemporary Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism is a pronounced analytic sub-theme within his collaborative study (with Gananath Obeyesekere) of contemporary religious change in Sri Lankan Buddhism (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988).

<sup>82</sup> Consequently, Kirsch’s general description of this religious complexity in Thailand would be acceptable to most scholars of Theravada Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia: “Thai religious complexity is of the sort commonly characterized as syncretic, in which elements derived from several historically discrete traditions have combined to form a single distinctive tradition. In such a situation, individuals may simultaneously hold beliefs or practice rituals derived from different traditions, without any apparent sense of incongruity” (Kirsch 1977: 241). Concerned as he is with comparative questions, Kirsch himself notes that “the Thai share this situation of religious complexity with other South and Southeast Asian peoples who commonly identify themselves as Theravada Buddhists” (1977: 241).

<sup>83</sup> Spiro (1982 [1970]) is one of the few anthropological scholars of Theravada Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia who seems, at times, receptive to the idea of an authentic core of traditional canonical Buddhism which has persisted amidst the stress and strains of historical diversity and cultural accommodation that would change or dilute it. This perspective might, in part, explain why his analytic model of complexity within Burmese Theravada Buddhism envisions that religious tradition as composed of relatively compartmentalized and discrete religious sub-systems involved in potentially contentious and conflictual interactions due to fundamental contradictions between them, rather than the model of holistic, integral integration and accommodation underlying most other anthropological visions of religious complexity within Theravada Buddhist societies.

the post World War II era. Most of these debates have centered, explicitly or implicitly, around abstract analytical and theoretical issues such as the relative dominance of different elements and traditions, the degree and character of their relative discreteness and/or integration, how to define and characterize these different modes of religiosity or constellations of relatively discrete religious elements, and how to envision and best characterize the interrelationships and articulations between these various elements and modes of religiosity within this total religious complexity.

One long-standing question regarding Thai religious complexity concerned the relative place of Theravada Buddhism within this religious complexity: was it dominant or subordinate to those other historical traditions and forms of religiosity? Many early scholars of Thai religion were impressed by the apparent persistence of indigenous/animistic beliefs, ritual practices and religious roles, which suggested to them that Buddhism was simply a “thin veneer” over an underlying and more fundamental indigenous cultural structure of cosmology and ritual and psychological orientation of religious goals and pragmatic techniques. For these scholars, in essence, Thai religion remained fundamentally animistic in character.<sup>84</sup> Currently however, most Western scholars agree that the Buddhist worldview and ethos occupies a place of primary dominance and ultimate hierarchical authority within Thai religious complexity<sup>85</sup>, although

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<sup>84</sup> Le May (1926), Landon (1939), de Young (1955) and Kaufman (1960) are prime exemplars of this common early perspective. Much of this perspective, no doubt, was informed by a sense of not finding that idealized, canonical Theravada tradition that historical and philological Western scholarship had led them to expect to find within Thai society. Confusion or dismay over the failure to find canonical Pali Buddhism was especially pronounced among early scholars studying the rural peasantry of Thailand.

<sup>85</sup> Classic and defining statements in this regard for Thailand include Piker (1968), Tambiah (1970), Keyes (1971; 1977a; 1977b), Kirsch (1967; 1977), Van Esterik (1982). A similar consensus on the dominance of Buddhist beliefs and practices and the incorporative subordination of Brahmanical and animistic beliefs and practices is also evident among Western scholars studying religious complexity in Theravada Buddhist Sri Lanka and Burma. For classic statements in this regard concerning Sri Lanka, see Obeyesekere (1963), Ames (1964; 1966), Evers (1968), Gombrich (1971), while for Burma, see Nash (1965) and Spiro (1982 [1970]). Swearer (1995) argues for this dominance of Buddhist worldview and ethos across all of Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia. It is worth noting that many of these studies are rooted fundamentally in analyses of the Theravada Buddhist cosmological order as it is

some scholars continue to argue that many non-elites outside the Sangha (and some “magical monks” within the Sangha) are oriented towards and interact with Buddhist symbols, sacred objects and ritual practices according to an essentially non-Buddhist logic, however that is defined.<sup>86</sup> Given this generally accepted structural, functional and ideological dominance, the Buddhist worldview and ethos is seen as framing, infusing, and molding all types of religiosity within its purview, especially those elements that historically were distinct from it. In practical terms, this dominance is reflected in specific ways such as the need to preserve as ultimate and final the causal power of Buddhist karma and merit or the need to preserve the primacy of the monastic vocation, the Buddhist Sangha and merit-making as the sole path to soteriological salvation.

A second persistent question among scholars regarding Thai religious complexity was whether to envision the resulting amalgam as either a single integrated syncretic religious system

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reflected in the pantheon of supramundane beings and the structure of ritual interactions between humans and those various beings.

<sup>86</sup> Thus, in contrast to most scholars, Tannenbaum (1995) asserts that a logic of amoral power, potency and protection – a general logic of supramundane religious power found in pre-Buddhist Thailand and Southeast Asia more generally – structures the actual religious beliefs and actions (or “practical religion”) of most followers of Theravada Buddhism, whether they are found in the uplands or lowlands of the mainland Southeast Asian region. Tannenbaum argues that this logic contradicts the more scripturalist interpretations of karma and ethical social action which she associates with the dominant canonical reading of religiosity favored by the majority of Thai social and intellectual elites as well as foreign anthropologists. Hence, she argues that: “while people can and do distinguish between these two kinds of observances [“Buddhist” practices and “animist” practices], they explain the actions of Buddhist and animist beings in similar terms and interact with them in similar ways” (1995: 11). Similarly against the grain but in a somewhat different idiom, Terwiel (1994 [1975]) in his analysis of religious ceremonies in central Thailand argues that rural peasant populations have localized Buddhism by reconceptualizing it within the framework of indigenous magical animism such that it could be called “animistic Buddhism.” As a result, “in the urban centres the preponderant themes of the leading monasteries may well have been directed to stimulate a devout acceptance of the Buddhist moral code...In the countryside, however, Buddhism appears to have been incorporated in the pre-existing animistic, manipulative, magic-oriented religion.” (1994 [1975]: 15). Thus, “when Buddhism was introduced, it became subservient to magico-animism” (1994 [1975]: 17). Hence, although the spread of central government influence and authority in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries intensified the significance and role of Buddhism and the Sangha in Thai rural society, these developments did not mean that “the villager accepts the philosophical tenets of Buddhism or adheres to its soteriology” (1994 [1975]: 17). Rather, it remains essentially true as it was hundreds of years ago that farmers “fed, housed, sponsored and themselves became Buddhist monks, not because they wished to escape rebirth, but primarily to acquire magical power” (1994 [1975]: 14). Both Tannenbaum and Terwiel similarly emphasize a religious orientation with regards to amoral power and potency as fundamentally defining of most Thai’s everyday and practical approach to sacrality and the supramundane; Terwiel explicitly links this orientation to the logic of pre-Buddhist animistic religiosity, while Tannenbaum is less clear in this regard.

or a conjoined constellation of several distinct and/or alternative religious systems of meaning and action. Thus, although most scholars of Theravada Buddhism agreed about the primacy of Buddhism, they could sharply disagree about the question of the degree of integration within this complex amalgamation.<sup>87</sup> In general, the view that this complex amalgamation constitutes a single, integrated syncretic religious system has dominated the interpretation of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand.<sup>88</sup> Thus, cults of the ancestors, local tutelary spirit cults, nature spirits, malevolent ghosts, techniques of divination, and Brahmanically-derived rituals concerning the vital essences (*khwan*) are all analyzed within the same ideological, structural and functional framework alongside analyses of Buddhist monks, the Sangha and merit-making because they are all envisioned as part of the same integrated, hierarchical system of religious beliefs, rituals and practitioners. In relatively concise terms: “Thai religious complexity is of the sort commonly characterized as syncretic, in which elements derived from several historically discrete traditions have combined to form a single distinctive tradition. In such a situation, individuals may simultaneously hold beliefs or practice rituals derived from different traditions, without any apparent sense of incongruity” (Kirsch 1977: 241).

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<sup>87</sup> Spiro’s analyses of Burmese Buddhism (1967, 1970) are the most famously argued position that no single syncretic religious system exists, but rather that Burmese Buddhism as a localized tradition is composed of multiple distinct and to some degree contrasting and even contradictory religious systems. Most other scholars of Burmese Buddhism, as well as other national Theravada traditions, perceive a more integrated, holistic, integral religious system. Even Tannenbaum (1995) who questions the ideological and practical dominance of canonical Buddhism, nonetheless perceives an integrated single religious system, although in this case ultimately structured by a different logic than most other scholars presume (see note above).

<sup>88</sup> Kirsch (1977) provides the classic statement for Thailand with an explicit eye towards comparative issues in the study of Theravada Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia. Tambiah (1970) argues for a single syncretic religious system conceived somewhat differently from Kirsch. Keyes (1977a) provides one general view of this integrated syncretism applicable to all of the Theravada Buddhist countries of the region, while Swearer (1995) offers up a similar perspective on a regional scale. Swearer has coined the term “inclusive syncretism” to describe this integrated, hierarchical structure of cosmological, ritual and social encompassment within Theravada Buddhist religious complexity, a phrase which I have adopted in the subheading of this section. Much of the persuasiveness of this approach was established by Obeyesekere’s carefully articulated argument for a single religious system with regards to Sinhalese Buddhism (1963). Kirsch’s analysis of the Thai case (1967, 1977), for instance, clearly relies in its inspiration and argumentative tact on the prior work of Obeyesekere (1963) as well as Ames (1963, 1964).

A third issue in the description and analysis of religious complexity within Thai Buddhism (and all historical traditions of Theravada Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia) has revolved around determining how many relatively discrete constellations or complexes of religious belief and practice make up this complexity and how they should be etically characterized, identified and bounded. The relatively stark yet complementary opposition between two axiomatic domains or complexes<sup>89</sup> of Thai religiosity – Theravada Buddhism, on one hand, and those beliefs and practices identified as “animistic” and associated most prominently with (indigenous) spirit cults in all of their complex regional variety, on the other – has served, at least implicitly, as the foundational starting point of all historical and social scientific attempts to conceptualize the structural organization and internal diversity of Thai religious complexity.<sup>90</sup> However, few Thai scholars have been satisfied to envision this complexity as essentially just dualistic in character and thus have developed a diverse set of more expansive models of Thai religious complexity which expand upon a diverse range of elements within these two polar opposites as well as between them. In the interest of brevity, I outline two of the most famous and frequently referred to ethnographically grounded efforts to model the total field of Thai religious complexity.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Different scholars focus on different analytic dimensions which, when contrasted across all of the domains of religiosity (whether those number two, three, four, or even five), etically define the particularity of each domain. Four analytic dimensions common to most of these structural models of the “sub-systems” of religious complexity are: 1) the type of supramundane entities engaged, 2) the ritual specialists who engage these supramundane entities, 3) the rites conducted by these specialists in order to achieve this interaction, and 4) the form of social participation or type of sociality involved in these interactions (i.e. individuals, households, clans, villages, regions, etc.).

<sup>90</sup> This fundamental contrast of Buddhism and non-Buddhism frequently carries connotations – whether explicit or implicit, intentional or unintentional – of fundamental, ideologically-charged historical dichotomies embedded in the West’s conceptualization of religiosity such as: other-worldly vs. this-worldly, religion vs. magic, rational vs. irrational, soteriological vs. thaumaturgical. These implicit contrasts come out strongly in Terwiel’s sharp contrast between monks and magic in his analysis of rural popular religiosity as a lived practical religion in Central Thailand (1994 [1975]).

<sup>91</sup> It is worth noting that in both of these models the complex of beliefs, practices, practitioners and social forms identified as Buddhist is relatively undifferentiated. This analytic imprecision is also true of most other models of Thai religious complexity in general – the other main ones being those proposed by Textor (1973) and Mulder (1990 [1979]). However, other scholars trying to model “syncretic” religious complexity in other Theravada Buddhist

Kirsch (1967; 1977) argues that there are three analytically discrete complexes whose overlapping structural features and functional interrelationships constitute a single, coherent overarching and enduring pattern of syncretic Thai religious complexity. Buddhism sits at the apex of Thai religious complexity, and through its integrated and standardized system of beliefs, rituals and specialists it provides Thai society with a unitary and shared set of general values, ideological standards and ritual idioms which emphasize order and determinacy within the world. These values, standards and idioms are oriented primarily towards soteriological goals via the role of the Buddhist monk and the laity's participation in a variety of merit-making activities. "Underneath" Buddhism there is a Brahmanical complex<sup>92</sup> whose cosmological worldview and general goals Kirsch sees as largely isomorphic with Buddhism and whose various discrete, individual ritual specialists – such as doctors of vital essences (*mau su khwan*), fortune tellers (*mau du*), and dispellers of bad fate (*mau sia khrau*) – are frequently ex-monks who learned their skills from other monks while in the Sangha. Kirsch conceptualizes this complex as a "this-

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countries have frequently chosen to work with the coarse dualism of Buddhism and non-Buddhism, and then subsequently created further distinctions within either or both of those categories. Thus, Spiro's model of Burmese religious complexity (1970) posits two opposing general complexes – Theravada Buddhism and the *nat* cults (broadly equivalent to animistic spirit cults) – and then further subdivides Theravada Buddhism into four distinct complexes – "nibbanic" Buddhism, "kammatic" Buddhism, "apotropaic" Buddhism, and "esoteric" Buddhism. Bechert's model of Sinhalese religious complexity (1978) posits two general complexes – Buddhism and non-Buddhist popular religion – and then proceeds to break each of these two general categories down into three further sub-complexes: canonical Theravada Buddhism, traditional state Buddhism, and modern reform Buddhism for the first complex and deity worship, (astrological) planetary cults, and demon cults for the second. For a select overview of the range of abstract analytic models of Theravada Buddhist religious complexity proposed in the social scientific literature, see the summaries provided in Day (1988: 173-184). Similar to Bechert, I feel that understanding the full dynamics of religious complexity in late-twentieth-century Thailand requires an appreciation for the complex historical dynamics within Thai Buddhism. Hence, any understanding of classical or contemporary "syncretic" complexity must be supplemented, and complicated, by an analysis of the rise, and changing historical influence of, modern Thai reform Buddhism and modern establishment state Buddhism. These alternative regimes of Buddhist religious value are examined later in this chapter.

<sup>92</sup> Importantly, Kirsch distinguishes between two main components of the Brahmanical complex, a Court Brahmanism tied to royal institutions, political centers and hereditary lineages of practitioners and a Folk Brahmanism which is more widely diffused throughout Thai society, popular instead of elite in character, and not hereditary in its transmission (Kirsch 1977: 251-252). Kirsch speculates that historically these may constitute discrete complexes which entered Thailand separately, and that, more significantly, the Folk Brahmanical complex may have been introduced and spread along with the initial introduction of Theravada Buddhism into Thailand and mainland Southeast Asia (Kirsch 1967: 336-339). Given that Kirsch's work emerges out of a village study in the Northeast of Thailand, his discussion of the Brahmanical complex focuses on Folk Brahmanism.

worldly arm of Buddhism proper” (Kirsch 1977: 254) which addresses basic religious problems which Buddhism poses but does not directly resolve, such as the legitimate creation of social attachments, involvement in the mundane world, and the moral significance of prosperity and health.<sup>93</sup> As a complex of proximate, client-centered religious therapy, the Brahmanistic complex, therefore, serves as a bridging “buffer” between the abstract, soteriological values and goals of Buddhism and the particular, thaumaturgic values and goals of the laity’s ordinary life. Finally, there is an animistic complex which is “fragmentary, disorganized and unsystematic” both ideologically and structurally (Kirsch 1977: 262). This complex is oriented towards capricious and unpredictable spirits (*phi*) who must be propitiated in order to either avert mundane problems or secure worldly benefits, and frequently this propitiation is managed by individual ritual specialists – such as shamanistic spirit doctors (*mau phi*) and intermediaries of tutelary village spirits (*jao phi pu ta*) – who learned their skills outside of any contact with

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<sup>93</sup> Interestingly, Kirsch concedes that one could also describe this complex as something like “lay Buddhist belief and practice” (Kirsch 1967: 331) but prefers to follow local emic categorization instead. Nonetheless, he also implicitly acknowledges that this complex is something of an analytic remainder category when he states: “In a gross way, we might gloss the term ‘Brahman’ as, ‘any person who is knowledgeable in esoteric religious techniques which are neither explicitly Buddhist (i.e., merit-making) nor concerned exclusively with animism (i.e., propitiating the ‘spirits’)” (Kirsch 1967: 333). Note here the reduction of Buddhism to merit-making and of animism to propitiation of spirits (*phi*), an analytic tack which unintentionally reproduces the stark, dualistic contrast between Buddhism and the spirits cults as the fundamentally defining extremes of Thai religious complexity. This orientation also leaves a wide diversity of cosmological beliefs, ritual practices, ritual specialists and religious goals clumped together within a single analytic complex between Buddhism and animism. The polyglot character of the Brahmanical complex is highlighted by the fact that Kirsch explicitly argues that it is composed of “unrelated configurations of beliefs and rituals” (Kirsch 1967: 308) which “are not unified in a single and coherent ideological system” (Kirsch 1967: 313) and which also lacks any collective social organization of its practitioners (Kirsch 1967: 306). The essentially polyglot and incoherent character of this complex in Kirsch’s model is significant since I will argue that both etically and emically contemporary professional spirit mediums are now increasingly located functionally and ideologically within this interstitial “Brahmanical” complex, whereas previously most other previous historical forms of spirit possession were much more firmly located, by both Buddhist elites and non-elites alike, within that complex identified by most scholars and Thai Buddhists themselves as “spirit cults” or “animism.” This categorical shift has produced novel tensions, ambiguities and contradictions in the structural, functional and ideological articulation of professional spirit possession from the perspective of the Thai Buddhist regime of inclusive syncretism, thus complicating the claims of professional spirit mediums when they assert that they are authentically and legitimately Buddhist despite, and even because of, their experience of possession.



Buddhism or the Sangha.<sup>94</sup> Rather than a “buffer,” the animistic complex stands in complete “symbolic opposition” to Buddhism according to Kirsch. At the same time, like the Brahmanical complex it also addresses immediate worldly problems such as dilemmas of prosperity and health, although in an idiom which, unlike the Brahmanical complex, emphasizes the individually unique, causally uncertain and capricious quality of worldly events and their resolution.

Tambiah (1970) proposes a four-part schematization of the ritual system he found in his study of Buddhism and the spirit cults in a Northeastern Thai village, although he implies this schema is applicable to the total religious system of Thai Theravada Buddhists. First, Tambiah discerns a complex of Buddhist rites. Focused primarily upon matters of good death and good rebirth, this complex is centered on the Buddha, access to whom is mediated by Buddhist monks. Collective social units such as households, kin and neighbors, and potentially the total community, are involved in public rituals of merit making such as festivals, house blessings, ordinations and mortuary rites centered around monks. Secondly, Tambiah identifies a complex of ‘Sukhwan’ rites. Focused primarily upon matters of prosperity and orderly progression in life, this complex is centered on the gods (*thewada*) access to whom is mediated by specialists such as the *mau khwan* and *paahm* (“Brahmin”). Typically households, kin and neighbors are involved in a variety of rites of passage and threshold rites regarding integration into village society and centered around the *mau khwan* and *paahm*. Third, Tambiah discerns a complex of guardian spirit rites. Focused primarily upon matters of protection and fertility, this complex is centered on benevolent local tutelary guardian spirits (*jao phau*) access to whom is mediated by ritual specialists such as the guardian spirit’s intermediary (*cham*), its spirit medium (*tiam*) and

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<sup>94</sup> This independent transmission of knowledge, practices and social roles is strongly conditioned by the fact that many of the ritual specialists in the animistic complex Kirsch observed were women, and thus could not become monastic Buddhist virtuosos or formally enter the Sangha.

diviners (*mau song*). Typically the total community is involved in collective agricultural rights regarding village-level interests and prosperity and centered around the *cham* and/or *tiam*, although people who suffer afflictions because they violated certain collective rules enforced by the guardian spirits are also individually treated by the *cham* and *tiam* by striking bargains with, and making offerings to, the guardian spirits. Finally, Tambiah identifies a complex of malevolent spirit rites. Focused primarily upon matters of bad death and bad or delayed rebirth, this complex is centered on capricious and malevolent spirits (*phi*) access to whom is mediated by ritual specialists such as the exorcist (*mau tham*). Typically only individuals and households are involved in exorcisms and rites of affliction centered around the *mau tham* who uses the superior supramundane authority of the *thewada* to expel forcefully those afflicting *phi* which have possessed their suffering victims.

Despite several obvious contrasts in analytic emphasis, local empirical detail and nomenclature, and the number of religious complexes which constitute Thai religious complexity, it is noteworthy that there is considerable overlap in the broad outlines and empirical content of Kirsch's and Tambiah's models. In particular, two of each of their complexes – Kirsch's Buddhism and Tambiah's Buddhist rites, Kirsch's (Folk) Brahmanism and Tambiah's "Sukhwan" rites – are broadly composed of similar supramundane entities, religious specialists, ritual practices, and forms of social participation. Moreover, both scholars also agree on the general cultural values and social functions each complex represents. Moreover, Tambiah's two remaining ritual complexes, one centered on guardian spirit rites and one centered on rites of malevolent spirits, when combined match up relatively closely in broad empirical terms, again, with Kirsch's third complex of "animism." Due to his structuralist approach to the analysis of ritual and myth, Tambiah apparently found it necessary, on the one hand, to contrast and oppose

these two fields of ritual action. Kirsch's historically sensitive Parsonian structural-functionalist orientation, on the other hand, seems to have led him to see Tambiah's two complexes as sharing a similar underlying ideological, functional and structural orientation in relation to the total field of Thai religious complexity, and so he combined them.

*Spirit possession within models of Thai religious complexity and syncretism.* Given my interest in the place of spirit possession and spirit mediumship within Thai Buddhist regime of inclusive syncretism, it is worth noting that both Kirsch and Tambiah can find no examples of the practice of spirit possession within either their Buddhist or Brahmanical / "Sukhwan" complexes. Nonetheless, both scholars find spirit possession to be, in part, centrally defining of their remaining complexes within the total field of Thai religious complexity. Kirsch's *mau phi*, the most numerous animistic specialists he observed during his fieldwork, are described as "shamanic" specialists who are possessed by mercurial "familiar spirits" which empower the specialists to engage in divination and healing. Kirsch however is less clear about whether the intermediaries of tutelary village spirits (*jao phi pu ta*) experience possession in order to fulfill their role obligations, a social fact which he notes is commonly found elsewhere within the ethnographic literature (Kirsch 1967: 377, 395). Tambiah's complex of malevolent spirits is doubly defined by spirit possession: serious illnesses are interpreted by his villagers as caused by malevolent spirits, often *phi paup*, that possess an individual, while the exorcist (*mau tham*) who drives out this intrusive spirit does so by going into trance and allowing both *thewada* and the spirit of his teachers (*khru*) to possess him and wage battle with the malignant *phi* (Tambiah 1970: 312-336). Similarly, both *cham* (intermediary) and *tiam* (medium), as vehicles of the benevolent tutelary village guardian spirits, mark their entry into their ritual role through possession, with the *cham* thereafter never or only rarely becoming again possessed, while the

*tiam* must undergo regular possession in order to serve the guardian spirits and the wider community by securing collective and individual good fortune for community members (Tambiah 1970: 274).

Another way of stating this conclusion regarding the ideological and social location of spirit possession with regards to religious complexity, this time in terms of emic categories and the Thai cosmological pantheon, is that both Kirsch and Tambiah seemingly only observe cases of possession by *phi* in their analyses of the total field of Thai religious complexity.<sup>95</sup> In other words, within regimes of Thai inclusive syncretism, spirit possession only takes the form of possession by relatively lowly cosmological agents, i.e. either benevolent but sometimes punishing tutelary guardian or ancestral spirits who preserve the morality of local communities or, more likely and more commonly, malevolent and capricious spirits that harass and harm humans in a selfish manner. The experience of spirit possession, consequently, is either ambiguously valued by Thais or explicitly repudiated.

Moreover, even those forms which are accepted and cultivated are not terribly highly esteemed within the total field of religious practitioners, which includes the much more esteemed Buddhist monk (*phra*) and the doctor of vital essences (*mau su khwan*), both of who are perceived to possess much more powerful and virtuous forms of knowledge and ritual

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<sup>95</sup> I say seemingly because Tambiah's case of the *mau tham* is an anomalous exception to this general principle, in that the exorcist is empowered through possession by, at least in part, *thewada*, which are more elevated divinities than *phi* and which Tambiah explicitly observes are categorically opposed to *phi* (Tambiah 1970: 264). *Thewada* are, in Tambiah's model, categorized instead as supramundane entities found within either the "Sukhwan" or Buddhist ritual complexes. Nonetheless, Tambiah categorizes the *mau tham* role as the prime ritual specialist associated with the complex of malevolent spirits. In addition, one could argue, against the grain of Tambiah's own analysis, that possession by the tutelary guardian spirits does not involve possession by *phi* but rather by *jao* (frequently translated as either "lord," "spirit," or "deity"), because the local terms for these guardian spirits are *jao phau*. Tambiah classifies *jao phau* as one type of *phi* and a benevolent representative of collective interests and village morality, in contrast to the malevolent capriciousness of malignant spirits associated with bad deaths. This issue of interpretation and analysis revolves around the complicated and unclear matter of whether in classificatory terms *jao* and *phi* are generally equivalent or even identical within either general Theravada Buddhist cosmology or its local articulations. Kirsch, for instance, notes that the local Phu Thai terminology for *mau phi* is *mau jao*.

techniques. Individuals regularly possessed by spirits deal only with individual problems and dilemmas such as illness and fortune telling, not with more significant religious issues such as soteriological salvation or karmic fate and one's future rebirth, as do monks, crucial life cycle rituals involving social transitions and collective identity, as do *mau su khwan*, or even issues of astrological fate and chance, as do *mau sia khrau*. Clearly, therefore, in terms of moral prestige, social authority and functional significance, the vast majority of spirit mediums occupy a subordinate and marginal significance within the overarching vision of Thai inclusive syncretism as documented and explained by Kirsch and Tambiah.

This dynamic is significant for understanding the meaning and significance of contemporary professional Thai spirit possession because professional spirit mediums are adamant in their assertion that they are not possessed by *phi* but rather by those *thewada* and *jao* that are essentially morally virtuous and relatively high-ranking supramundane entities within the Thai cosmological pantheon. These possessing entities include Chinese gods, Hindu gods, bodhisattvas, martial heroes and noble heroines from Thai local or national history, as well as the spirits of famously devout, but now dead, Buddhist monks. In this sense then, professional spirit mediums explicitly identify themselves as unrelated to those generally negatively valued supramundane entities, *phi*, with which spirit possession in general has been more traditionally identified by foreign scholars studying the structure of Thai syncretic religious complexity. By extension, therefore, professional spirit mediums also dissociate themselves from those various types of ambiguously moral or explicitly immoral ritual practices and religious goals generally associated with *phi*. In contrast, professional spirit mediums claim to embody an ethically pure and more prestigious form of moral authority, supramundane efficacy, sacral empowerment, and social legitimacy than conventionally has been granted to experiences of spirit possession.

*Spirit Mediums and Spirit Possession in relation to Monks and Dharma, Experts and Esoteric Knowledge within the Thai Regime of Inclusive Syncretism.* What place do spirit mediums and the experience of spirit possession occupy within the overarching heterogeneous field of disparate worldly and transcendent goals, potent experts and virtuous monks, modalities of sacral power, hierarchies of authority, and efficacious ritual techniques, all of which in combination constitute, in the broadest possible sense, the total religious field as described by scholars of inclusive syncretism? The suggestions that follow are somewhat speculative, primarily because neither spirit possession nor spirit mediums have received very much sustained attention within either the historical or the ethnographic literature focused on Thai religiosity as a complex and differentiated field of beliefs, practices, specialists and goals. Monks, merit-making and both official and popular Buddhist beliefs have regularly received exhaustive attention when scholars choose to explore Thai religion. Even experts (*mau*) and their esoteric knowledge and practices (*wicha*) have received considerable attention, especially those experts, such as *mau su khwan* or *mau du*, that are widely perceived as quite common, prevalent and important within the religious landscape of most Thai villages, towns or cities. Spirit mediums and spirit possession, however, have typically received only the most abbreviated attention within the existing ethnographic literature, and only rarely has any scholar seriously attempted to comparatively examine them in empirical detail in relation to other more common and prestigious types of religious actors or forms of ritual practice.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Comparing a number of classic ethnographies of village Thailand is instructive with regard to this abbreviated attention. Kaufman's classic community study (1977 [1960]) devotes approximately one and a half pages to the topic of spirit possession in a chapter on "Daily Life," while he devotes about 55 pages to the topic of Buddhism, monks, laity and monasteries and 15 pages to Brahmanical and Animistic beliefs and practices. Kingshill's village study in northern Thailand (1976) devotes 159 pages to the topic of religion, out of which approximately 3 pages deal with spirit possession or spirit mediums. Attagara's investigation of folk religion in central Thailand (1967) is relatively voluminous on the topic of spirit possession by comparison, discussing three different types of spirit possession over 12 pages out of a total of 113 pages devoted to Thai religion. Kirsch's (1967) and Tambiah's (1970) ethnographic village studies in the northeast of Thailand provide the most exhaustive empirical descriptions and

Clearly, spirit mediums and the experience of spirit possession are conceptualized as standing in stark contrast both to the soteriological path of liberation, which is only possible for those who are Buddhist monks, and to those efforts to reshape one's karmic heritage through the making of merit (*tham bun*), a task most typically mediated for the laity by the actions of monks. In this sense, spirit mediums as religious actors are similar to all other non-monastic religious specialists within the regime of inclusive syncretism: they can offer only thaumaturgic interventions designed to assist individuals who wish to obtain worldly rewards and who seek to achieve success in their more immediate mundane concerns.

But what worldly rewards and mundane concerns can spirit mediums address? In other words, with what kinds of thaumaturgic assistance and mediation are they most closely associated? From the perspective of the existing historical and ethnographic literature, it would appear that within the framework of inclusive syncretism, spirit mediums are primarily, perhaps even almost exclusively, sought out in order to cure individual somatic disturbances caused by spirits who either attack or possess an individual. In this sense, traditional Thai spirit mediums are primarily involved in classic anthropological cults of affliction. Thus, when Thai Buddhists suspect that an individual is suffering physical or mental illness due to the influence of a malevolent or punishing spirit, they seek out a spirit medium in order to diagnose the problem more clearly and to determine what specific steps to pursue to appease the disturbing spirit.

This almost singular focus on resolving individual somatic disturbances comes through strongly in the more empirically comprehensive discussions of spirit mediums and the practices associated with them provided by both Tambiah and Kirsch. Tambiah does mention that the mediums of village tutelary spirits are also involved in rites designed to secure more general

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nuanced comparative analyses of spirit possession and spirit mediums within the existing Thai ethnographic literature examining religious complexity.

collective benefits for the village such as agricultural fecundity. Nonetheless, his analysis highlights and even emphasizes that these same spirit mediums also provide relief to individuals who have violated general social prohibitions and thus are suffering somatically due to punishment by these tutelary spirits. Consequently, in this sense the spirit mediums of village tutelary spirits in Tambiah's study are shown in their actual social practice to be concerned primarily with the same types of problems of individual health and illness that dominate that other complex of *phi*-related rites revolving around possession and affliction by malevolent spirits (Tambiah 1970: 263-336). Similarly, Kirsch's discussion of shamanic spirit doctors (*mau phi*) emphasizes their role in diagnosing and resolving the somatic and moral dimensions of ill health, either by appeasing an offending spirit or, alternatively in serious cases, domesticating it as a personal spirit familiar (Kirsch 1967: 395-402).

Scattered throughout the academic literature there are hints that traditional Thai spirit mediums also can, at least sometimes, address other matters of worldly concern to the Buddhist laity, matters which do not solely revolve around dilemmas of ill health due to spirit attack or possession. Thus, for instance, Kirsch notes that *mau phi* can contact their spirits in order to engage in "fortune-telling" and "to make predictions about future actions and events." He also adds that aside from acting as an intermediary between ill patients and the spirits, *mau phi* also may perform a *su khwan* ceremony or engage in folk medicine, such as massage (Kirsch 1967: 397).<sup>97</sup> Likewise, Attagara mentions that the spirit medium in his village was approached for a variety of types of assistance: to create magically efficacious *yan* (a symbol of power on cloth

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<sup>97</sup> Unfortunately, Kirsch does not elaborate on how spirit mediums learn those traditional techniques of esoteric knowledge that are conventionally associated with instruction from lineages of spirit-teachers. It is not clear, therefore, whether these practices by spirit mediums are based on their incorporation into such lineages of esoteric knowledge, ritual practice and supramundane potency, or whether they are simply practicing as amateurs who have studied codified, mass produced ritual manuals without the empowering, embodied mediation of an accomplished teacher (*khru*).



usually activated by a *khatha*) that will ward off evil spirits, to help with delivery in a difficult pregnancy, for advice on whether to buy some land, to help resolve domestic disputes and family quarrels, and to prevent a husband from leaving his wife for a mistress (Attagara 1967: 37).<sup>98</sup> Yet all in all, these more variegated, expansive range of thaumaturgic services often seem the exception to the rule. In general within the framework of inclusive syncretism as described in the anthropological literature, spirit mediums are primarily associated with healing those individuals made ill by spirit attack, and they have the power to do so by means of a capacity for communication with those possessing spirits that occupy a relatively lowly place within the Buddhist pantheon and thus are also as a result likely to be territorially-bound locality spirits of one sort or another.

Given this modality of sacral power and this type of thaumaturgic assistance, what is the relationship of traditional spirit mediums to those other general categories of religious actors – monks (*phra*) and experts (*mau*) – who can also tap supramundane sacral powers in order to provide worldly benefits? Although all of these types of religious actors can provide thaumaturgic assistance for dealing with general health problems or illnesses and many are approached with regards to those specific illnesses which they specialize in treating (for instance, some monks are known to be specifically involved in exorcising malevolent possessing *phi* and *mau su khwan* deal with illnesses resulting from the disaggregation of vital essences), traditional spirit mediums stand out in two ways. One, their almost exclusive reliance on treating only

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<sup>98</sup> It is interesting to note that Attagara, in implicit contrast with Tambiah, asserts that “in case of the possession of a benevolent spirit like this, the status of the spirit is different. It is preferably not referred to as *phi* but generally as *jao*” (Attagara 1967: 38). In addition, Attagara observes that this spirit medium cut her own tongue in order to use the blood to make *yan*, a practice of self-mortification more typically associated with traditions of Chinese spirit-mediumship in Thailand rather than traditional indigenous Thai spirit possession. It is possible, therefore, that in this case the more expansive range of therapeutic practices beyond simply dealing with ill-health due to spirit attack or possession reflects a non-indigenous Chinese cultural logic and social practice of spirit possession. It may even be the case that Attagara is describing a Chinese spirit medium, rather than a traditional Thai spirit medium associated with either an ancestral or a guardian spirit cult.

illnesses caused by spirits. Two, the fact that their main power and efficacy results from their ability to communicate with spirits that reveal how to solve health problems via strategies of propitiation and sacrifice.

In this sense, traditional spirit mediums from the perspective of inclusive syncretism are not empowered through instruction in and the possession of esoteric knowledge which in itself can confer supramundane thaumaturgic benefits when ritually accessed appropriately, as is the case with both monks and *mau*. The sacral power of traditional spirit mediums, instead, lies in the knowledge which the familiar or tutelary spirit brings to the possessed individual, and thus spirit mediums do not need to undergo any instruction in order to be able to heal individuals or engage in divination. For Thais, in fact, one cannot learn how to be a spirit medium, and in this way they differ profoundly from monks and *mau* regarding not only the source of their supramundane efficacy, but also their means of accessing and cultivating it and, in addition, their ability either to continually possess that knowledge or to tap into it at will (Kirsch 1967: 381). Thus, although traditional *mau phi* hold ceremonies to induct new initiates and propitiate their familiar possessing spirits, these are not symbolically or ritually equivalent to the *yok khru* and *phithi wai khru* ceremonies found among traditional *mau*. Whereas the former are raucous affairs of music, dancing and alcohol consumption designed to entertain the *phi* and entice them into possessing their mounts (Kirsch 1967: 398-401), the latter are more somber and austere ritual occasions designed to foster or renew one's membership within, empowerment by, and submission to a lineage of potent teachers (*khru*) (Irvine 1982; Wong 2001).

This distinction between traditional spirit mediums and *mau* is reinforced by the fact that, despite the exception of Kirsch's study, generally spirit mediums are not given the title *mau*. Rather, other scholars have noted that spirit mediums "are not entitled to be called *mau*" and are

instead identified as intermediaries (*khon song*) precisely because they do not conform to the *mau*'s traditional model of esoteric knowledge, how it is passed on and renewed, nor how it is collectively reproduced and authorized (Hanks 1963: 25). This basic categorical distinction between *mau* and spirit mediums is also not surprising given the fact that it is widely believed that the esoteric knowledge of *mau* is generally so potentially dangerous and somatically destabilizing or lethal in its potency that only those individuals with strong hearts (*cai khaeng*), unified *khwan* and pronounced mental and emotional control can endure it and utilize it successfully (Irvine 1982: 201-217). In contrast, susceptibility to spirit possession is widely believed within the regime of inclusive syncretism to be most pronounced among those whose *khwan* are disaggregated and who are weak hearted (*cai aun*) due to a weakened or abnormal mental or somatic condition (Golomb 1985: 238). Thus, according to this emic logic, those most likely to experience spirit possession are also those least likely to be capable of becoming a *mau*.<sup>99</sup>

Given that strong heartedness is seen as characterizing men and weak heartedness as characterizing women (Irvine 1982: 109-114), it is not surprising that spirit mediums and *mau* are so strongly contrasted within the regime of inclusive syncretism: spirit mediums are predominantly females (or transvestites) because their physiological and mental constitution makes them vulnerable to spirit attack and less likely to become *mau* due to their weakened constitutions as well as their inability to join the Sangha within which much of this esoteric

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<sup>99</sup> Piker (1973: 315) notes that not only ghost possession but many other kinds of afflictions, such as sorcery victimization and derangement while meditating, are "thought by villagers to be intimately associated with the breakdown of psychological self-control (*sathi*), the loss of self-awareness (*sia sathi*), and the flight or departure of psychic agencies" such as *cai* and *khwan*. Piker found all these afflictions associated with those who are *cai aun*, and that, further, the distinction between being *cai aun* or *cai khaeng* was primarily related to the distinction between those who could not "resist investing situations with affect" and those who could (1973: 315-316). These same underlying themes of psychic constitution, self-control regarding cognition and affect, and gender identity emerge in contrasts between monks and spirit mediums, meditation and spirit possession.

knowledge is recorded and transmitted.<sup>100</sup> At the same time, men predominate among *mau* because they are less susceptible to spirit attacks, are more likely to be able to endure the risks of possessing esoteric knowledge, and are able to join the Sangha where not only much of this knowledge is transmitted but whose rules of monastic discipline and meditative techniques aid those seeking to increase their mental and emotional control. Thus, a gendered Thai oppositional logic of personality types and psycho-emotional constitution reinforces both a contrasting cultural logic of relative supramundane powers and thaumaturgic efficacy and a discriminating social logic of which gendered individuals can occupy which religious roles.<sup>101</sup>

The low religious status, authority and prestige of traditional spirit mediums within the framework of inclusive syncretism, therefore, is not surprising when one comparatively examines emic Thai beliefs about them in relation to other types of religious specialists, in particular monks and *mau*, who can also provide thaumaturgic relief. The supramundane source of traditional spirit mediums' sacral power, *phi* and other relatively amoral or ambiguously moral entities within the cosmological pantheon, have a low status in comparison with *ruesi*, the dharma and *itthirit*. Only able to resolve problems of illness, the causal efficacy of spirit mediums is limited to the most proximate level of immediate dilemmas, rather than the more encompassing causal levels of either fate (*khrau*) and luck (*chok*) or karma which *mau* and *phra* can address. Rather than being able to resolve a diffuse set of worldly dilemmas and needs as is

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<sup>100</sup> Females can become masseurs (*mau nuat*) and midwives (*mau tamyae*), but these types of experts are seen as less bound up with potent esoteric knowledge and even those ritual techniques and activating incantations employed by these experts are weaker and more auxiliary to those naturalistic techniques that are seen as more defining of these forms of therapeutic expertise (Irvine 1982: 208; Golomb 1985: 79).

<sup>101</sup> In light of these facts, it is significant that even though spirit mediums do have the title *mau* in the village Kirsch studied, he nonetheless did not analytically group them along with all of the other types of traditional *mau* which he sees as dominating the complex of Brahmanism. Instead, Kirsch treated spirit mediums as belonging, according to the logic of their beliefs and practices, in that religious complex he classified as "Animism." Clearly, the overall mix of social facts associated with spirit mediums – their typical gender, their mode of recruitment, their style of ritual practice, the source of their supramundane power, their socially ambivalent or stigmatized character, among other facts – led Kirsch to distinguish spirit mediums from other *mau*, despite the similar title ascribed to all of them.

the case with other practitioners, spirit mediums are not only limited primarily, if not exclusively, to matters of ill health, but even more specifically, to those health problems resulting from spirit attack or spirit possession. Unlike other practitioners whose thaumaturgic efficaciousness resides in knowledge and techniques which they learn, master and in some sense continuously embody as their own through instruction, the efficaciousness of spirit mediums solely resides with the spirit which possesses them and only for the limited amount of time that the spirit remains in possession of them. Instead of possessing the culturally more highly valued personal characteristics of a strong heart, somatic balance and mental-cum-emotional control and restraint, as is the case with other practitioners who possess and control potentially dangerous supramundane potency, spirit mediums are characterized instead by a weak heart, somatic imbalance and a loss of mental and emotional control. All of these comparative weaknesses, therefore, reinforce both ideologically and socially the marginal, subordinate and generally low status of spirit mediums within the total field of religious practitioners available for thaumaturgic assistance as conceptualized by the regime of inclusive syncretism.

It is important to understand the nuances of the classificatory logics, symbolic associations, social correlates and behavioral markers underlying the overall low status, prestige and authority which are ascribed to spirit mediums within the framework of Buddhist inclusive syncretism. It is important because as an overarching and generalized structure of value and interpretation it subtly shapes many contemporary Thai perceptions and evaluations of the experience of spirit possession in general, as well as the specific claims of professional spirit mediums in particular. Even more importantly, it is a structure of value and interpretations against which professional spirit mediums struggle because it conflicts with how they and others within their subculture – such as followers and even clients – interpret possession as well as the

public identity, social recognition and religious authority they wish to claim for themselves as possessed individuals.

Professional spirit mediums do not see themselves as possessed by lowly, amoral *phi*, but rather by virtuous *thewada* whose elevated status within the cosmological pantheon means that they can exert control over the limitations of space, time and nature in the service of those seeking their assistance. Although professional spirit mediums do treat illnesses, they do not only restrict their services to health problems, much less only those health problems induced by malicious spirit attack or spirit possession. Contemporary professional spirit mediums treat a wide range of illnesses ranging from cancer and terminal illnesses to various chronic problems such as epilepsy which are not necessarily conceptualized as having anything to do with spirit attack. Similarly, contemporary professional spirit mediums also are concerned with much more than just matters of proximate causality, frequently intervening at the request of clients to help resolve problems of fate and luck as well, a level of causality which operate at a more encompassing and diffuse level within the traditional Thai cosmological worldview. In this sense, professional spirit mediums frequently claim competency in a wide range of ritual practices and esoteric forms of knowledge more commonly associated in the classical perspective with *mau* or folk Brahmanism, such as possessing and utilizing *khatha* or performing rituals like extending destiny (*suep chata*) and dispelling bad fate (*sadau khrau*). Moreover, although traditionally spirit mediums presumably had little, if any, direct social involvement with Buddhist monks – reflecting the fundamental opposition between Buddhism and animism within the structure of classical Thai religious complexity – professional spirit mediums now perceive themselves as good Buddhist who should not only be actively and enthusiastically supporting the Sangha but who are in certain ways crucial to the continued vitality and perpetuation of

Buddhism as a religious tradition. They are possessed, after all, by those elevated, virtuous *thewada* whose responsibility it is to protect and perpetuate Buddhism. In all of these ways and more, therefore, professional spirit mediums find themselves constantly struggling to overcome the marginal religious authority, subordinate social role, and low cultural status accorded to the experience of spirit possession and the role of spirit medium by the Thai religious regime of inclusive syncretism.

*Professional Spirit Mediums and Inclusive Syncretic Buddhism in the Context of Forest Robe Donation Ceremonies.* It is interesting to note that the public ritual behavior and treatment of professional spirit mediums during the two robe donation ceremonies in Chumphon in 1996 conformed in at least three ways to the stereotypic generalized expectations one would draw from the religious regime of Thai inclusive syncretism. First, the pronounced asymmetrical ideological, symbolic and pragmatic opposition between “Buddhism” and the “spirit cults” as called for normatively by the framework of inclusive syncretism was reproduced relatively effortlessly during both the consecration ceremony in front of the shrine to King Chulalongkorn and the later robe donation ceremony inside the congregation hall. In neither case during the ritual action was there any significant or sustained communication between professional spirit mediums and monks, nor was there any coordinated or joint ritual action. While both monks and mediums occupied the same ritual space for a select period of time and had a prominent role to play in the total composite sequence of ritual action, they slid past each other interactively in an almost frictionless fashion. In many ways at an interactive level they each respectively almost seemingly failed to or refused to acknowledge each other’s presence as significant participating ritual actors.

Moreover, their symbolic and ideological opposition was subtly conveyed via the minimal amount of time that the monks remained within the same social space of ritual action with the professional mediums. The monks did not linger beyond the benedictory moments prior to the consecration ceremony, nor did they linger at the ritual scene after having formally accepted the robe donations spearheaded by the entourages of spirit mediums. Instead in each case they exited the scene quickly, leaving the ritual space to mediums, Brahmins and laity in the prior case and mediums and laity in the latter. Their conjoint presence, thus, conformed in many ways to a principal of segregation that is also implied by the religious regime of inclusive syncretism. In both temporal and spatial terms, monks and mediums under the terms of inclusive syncretism carry out relatively segregated religious lives and activities. When monks were in the ritual scene and active, the mediums were silent, reserved and self-effacing, particularly in terms of their more dramatic stereotypic behavior of trance possession which was muted to the point of invisibility. Upon the exiting of the monks from the shared ritual space and action, however, mediums rather quickly took center stage as dramatically evocative and compelling religious presences.

Lastly, this asymmetrical and segregated behavior between monks and mediums was reflective as well of the relations of hierarchical dominance between them encoded within the framework of inclusive syncretism. In the rituals of both shrine consecration and robe donation, monks clearly occupied a position of ritual priority, cosmological pre-eminence and sacral superiority. The deferral to them in initiating the shrine consecration ceremony and their centrality to the successful ritual exchange during the robe donation ceremony highlighted their hierarchical religious dominance in both cases. In addition, the immediate and unreserved deferral to their presence and authority when they entered the ritual space further marked their



positions of dominance, as did the manner in which the professional mediums restrained their own behavior and muted their own performative presence when the monks occupied center stage in the ritual action. The symbolic dominance of the monks was also reflected by the fact that they could choose to not socially acknowledge or recognize the ritual presence of the mediums or their claims to religious authority, whereas the professional mediums were precisely unable to reciprocate with the same failure of recognition. Their performative reserve actually signaled exactly the opposite – an implicit recognition of subordination.

It is important to note, however, that this opposition, segregation and dominance-cum-subordination is a highly contextualized affair and primarily emblematic of formal and public ritual settings outside of the subculture of professional spirit mediums. For example, on the evening before the shrine consecration and robe donation ceremonies, Sam and other spirit mediums engaged in sustained discussions with the abbots of the monasteries at hand as they coordinated preparations for the ceremonies the next day. Similarly, Sam and other Bangkok professional spirit mediums interact with monks frequently when requesting and acting as hosts at merit-making ceremonies at their abodes or when serving as lay ritual leaders who are organizing donations to the Sangha or supporting charitable activities or religious projects being run by monks or monastic institutions. In public settings and ritual events outside the subculture during which professional mediums become possessed by *jao* or *thep*, however, one typically observes inclusive syncretism's normative expectations of symbolic opposition, segregation and distancing between monks and mediums. The act of possession itself – associated in the general public's mind with a loss of psychic control and integrity, potentially dubious moral cosmological agents, and the questionable taint of spirit cults and hedonistic or undisciplined

behavior – seems to act as a cue which triggers the salience of the Buddhist regime of inclusive syncretism as the most salient schema for modeling ritual behavior and relations.

Again however, it is important to note that this cueing happens in public ritual events that occur outside the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums and especially when interacting with monks who have limited personal familiarity with or negative impressions of the subculture. Within the subculture, however, there are public ritual events in which such opposition, segregation and hierarchy is highly muted and even at times almost wholly absent. This dynamic is most evident in certain types of *wai khru* (honoring the teacher) ceremonies. During these important annual events it is not unusual to observe a small number of monks participating as witnesses and honored guests during certain ritual segments over the course of the typically two day ceremony. Moreover, they are not hidden away on the sidelines or out of public sight, but typically granted an honored and central presence on the ritual stage. Depending upon their personalities and mood, they may or may not engage in sustained casual conversations and interactions with both the medium host but also his peers who are also present as guests, whether they are possessed or not. In addition, it is very common for these valorized monastic guests to play a key role in central ritual activities, such as lighting the commemorative candles of the principal *bai sri* offerings or providing blessings to the various guests, the majority of whom are mediums in states of possession.

Within the ritual culture of the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums, therefore, there are certain emergent spaces of innovative religious value and practice that do not conform to the general cultural logic underlying the Thai Buddhist regime of inclusive syncretism (or to the other regimes of modernist reform or establishment state Buddhism that I will next discuss). Within these spaces and times instead, an alternative vision of an allied and

conjoint relationship between Buddhism and spirit possession is cultivated and expounded upon. These alternative visions, however, have limited play even within the total life of the subculture more generally, and have no authoritative reach beyond the subculture. In fact, they have so little reach that those outside the subculture are for the most part simply unaware that such an alternative vision of the conjoint imbrication of possession and Buddhism not only is theoretically possible but also flourishes as an actually existing – if momentary, occasional, and highly contextualized – social reality and mode of religious practice and consciousness within Thai society.

### **Modernist Reform Buddhism and Bangkok Professional Spirit Mediums**

When speaking with educated and professional Thais in Bangkok, the bourgeoisie in the most general sense, it is common to find individuals who are willing to draw sharper distinctions between elements within the religious field than just soteriological versus thaumaturgic in focus or otherworldly versus worldly in orientation. Thais who have been exposed to or educated in a more naturalistic and secular cosmology can slip at times into making distinctions between the truly religious and that which is superstitious and thus unreasonable (*mai mi hetphon*), magical (*thang saiyasat*) or foolish (*ngom ngai*). One finds this language used most commonly among scholars, journalists, professionals of science-based occupations, and self-appointed educators and proponents of modernity. For these individuals, most suspect are beliefs and behaviors associated with the propitiation or coercion of lowly supramundane entities (especially *phi*), with the manipulation of amoral supramundane protective powers via various ritual technologies, or with the use of various esoteric and occult knowledges (*wicha*). Foolish and magical attitudes, behavior and objects also are perceived typically as excessively worldly in focus, as ambiguously

base in motivation, as deceptive in intent, and as troublingly amoral in orientation. In a modernist language of superstition and magic, these are practices classified as “sorcery” and “witchcraft” more generally.<sup>102</sup> For bourgeoisie Bangkokians of a particular sort therefore, spirit possession easily falls into the general category of the “magical” (*saiyasat*) which is itself a sign of the temporally primitive, the theologically suspect, the morally duplicitous, and the instrumentally irrelevant.

Such language, metaphors and interpretations indicate that what an earlier generation of scholars of Thailand have called “inclusive syncretism” is not the only Buddhist-oriented framework of religious classification and evaluation informing thought and action in contemporary Thai society. Contemporary Thai Theravada Buddhism also embraces another sharply contrasting understanding of the Thai Buddhist tradition as a structure of value, a mode of theological interpretation, and an historical social phenomenon. This schema for interpretation and evaluation – this alternative regime of religious value and social project of religion making – can be glossed as modernist reform Buddhism. Emerging in the nineteenth century, this project of religious reform and revitalization within Siamese Buddhism reflected historical changes resulting from the convergence and entanglement of endogenous and exogenous social forces. Moreover, modernist reform Buddhism represents, in part, a critical reappraisal and reconceptualization of those ideas about morality, knowledge, power, efficacy and authority implicit within what has been called inclusive syncretism. Modernist reform Buddhism as presented in late twentieth century Thailand actually constitutes an explicit refutation of many of

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<sup>102</sup> Styers 2004 analyzes the scholarship about magic in the modern West to show how discourses and practices around “magic” index a variety of exceptions to normative post-Enlightenment Western ideas about instrumental rationality, industrious labor, regulated desire and social propriety. The idea of “magic” therefore constitutes the boundary of proper piety and religiosity, of normative modern subjectivity, and of expected social and psychological control and self-discipline, however those are defined.

these ideas as currently understood as well as the very logic of incorporation, subordination and marginalization which animates a religious regime of inclusive syncretism.

As a result, many of those beliefs and practices which occupy the potential outer edge of religious legitimacy from the perspective of inclusive syncretism are reconceptualized within modernist reform Buddhism as heterodox to Buddhism proper. In this sense, what in one regime is treated as subordinate and marginal becomes instead in another regime antithetical to, or a negation of, authentic and pure Theravada Buddhism. Through a reconceptualization of traditional Buddhist cosmology and a rethinking of Buddhist ideas about soteriology and thaumaturgy, modernist reform Buddhism reclassifies a wide range of especially popular and vernacular beliefs and practices – including spirit possession – as magical, superstitious and essentially non-Buddhist. Consequently, in contrast to inclusive syncretism, modernist reform Buddhism fundamentally denies the reality and authenticity of spirit possession and thus thoroughly repudiates any claims by spirit mediums to even marginal and subordinate religious authority and legitimacy.

Most scholars of Thai Buddhism would locate the historical roots of such a modernist vision of disenchantment and demystification as originating in the mid-nineteenth century with a reform movement inspired in part by the intensified Siamese encounter with the ideological and institutional presence of Western colonial modernity.<sup>103</sup> And they would locate this new

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<sup>103</sup> Some scholars have discerned important historical precursors to this modernist reform mentality in endogenous intellectual and political developments within the late eighteenth-century Siamese polity. Wyatt, for example, argues that Rama I, as part of his process of founding a new Bangkok-centered political dynasty, fostered a “subtle revolution” in Siamese thought. In his reinvention of Siamese Buddhist tradition, Wyatt sees Rama I as subtly highlighting the autonomy of human rationality. Wyatt argues that in his desire to purify and restore Siamese Buddhism, Rama I “seems to have been most concerned to limit the role of the supernatural ... and emphasize the primacy of a more philosophical Buddhism” (Wyatt 1982: 29). As a result, Wyatt interprets Rama I as initiating an historical process “by which the Buddhist elements of Siamese religious observance began to gain ground at the expense of the brahmanical and animistic elements,” a development he explicitly describes as “the beginnings of a sort of Buddhist ‘Reformation’ “ (Wyatt 1982: 28-29, 43). Keyes concurs in this evaluation, arguing that “He [Rama

modernist vision as the product of a particularly brilliant Siamese aristocrat. Prince Mongkut, a grandson of Rama I, was ordained as a monk in 1824, apparently in order to avoid a divisive battle with his half-brother, the future Rama III, for the Chakri throne. Mongkut would remain a monk for twenty-seven years until his accession to the throne in 1851 upon the death of Rama III. During those nearly three decades Mongkut's intellectual and institutional journey within the Sangha would provoke what many have described as a reformation of Siamese Buddhism, a self-conscious project of change and revitalization that not only transformed the rules of monastic discipline, challenged many conventions of ritual practice, and redefined the character and meaning of the Buddhist canon, but, according to one scholar, "chang[ed] the very spirit of Siamese Buddhism as a religion" (Vella 1957: 39).<sup>104</sup>

Due to observed discrepancies between the Pali canon and historic practice, Mongkut sought a purer and more authentic Buddhism that would resolve contradictions centered on monastic precepts and practice. Eventually, he would initiate a new ordination lineage and monastic order, the Thammayut, that institutionalized his more authentic vision of monastic discipline. In time, this reform movement – animated by a vision of purification and restoration that emphasized the Pali canonical scriptures over vernacular canons and teachings – became conjoined with a more general Siamese response to the rising challenge posed by Western civilization in general and missionaries in particular. It was through first Catholic and then Protestant missionaries that Mongkut was exposed to Western knowledge and civilization. Mongkut took great interest in not only Christian theology and world affairs, but also Western medicine and numerous Western natural sciences. However, the implicit and explicit critique of

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I] proscribed many animistic practices as being inappropriate for Buddhists, thereby laying the groundwork for the Buddhist reformation that was to follow in the mid- and late-nineteenth century" (Keyes 1989: 41).

<sup>104</sup> The most exhaustive and definitive study of Mongkut and the religious reforms he initiated remains Reynolds (1972). Additional studies from which the following synopsis is drawn include Tambiah (1976), Ishii (1986), and Johnson (1997).

Buddhism offered by these Christian missionaries – armed with their own certainty about the superiority of Christianity, Western science and/or Western civilization – provoked within Mongkut a need to defend not only Buddhism but also Siamese culture and civilization against the multifaceted ideological and practical challenges posed by the West.

The challenge posed by the Western Christian missionaries intensified, radicalized and reoriented Mongkut's efforts to separate the true Theravada Buddhist canon from its mistaken and impure historical accretions. The Buddhism that needed to be revived and defended was increasingly conceptualized as both an elite and a popular tradition, as a religion of not just ascetic virtuosos but of a people and a culture as well. Through his dialogue with Christian missionaries, Mongkut learned a new colonial discourse of modernity grounded in Western ideas about rationality, scripturalism, empiricism, historical authenticity, and civilizational progress. In the course of this education, Mongkut appropriated these ideas and wove them into his revisionist understanding and definition of an authentic Siamese Buddhism capable of meeting the challenge of both scriptural veracity and the colonial modernity of the missionaries.<sup>105</sup>

Mongkut was the most dramatic and prominent exemplar of a larger, yet still modest group of Thai ruling elites – both monastic and lay – whose exposure to the challenge of nineteenth-century Western knowledge and power led them to reconceptualize their cultural and religious heritage.<sup>106</sup> Spurred on by both the reform-minded Thammayut and the need to defend

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<sup>105</sup> The influence of Western cultural categories and presumptions became, therefore, crucial in shaping Mongkut's reformist project. As Ishii explains it: "his discussions with the missionaries made him realize that it was the folk beliefs appended to Buddhism that underlay their contempt for his religion. He became firmly convinced that in order to defend Buddhism from the pressures of Western civilization, he must strip it of these heterodox accretions" (Ishii 1986: 159). For Mongkut, therefore, a strategy of exclusion supplemented and even replaced a strategy of subordination when dealing with religious complexity and those elements perceived as somehow non-Buddhist or at least not Buddhist enough.

<sup>106</sup> Many scholars have noted that the movement towards cultural and religious reformism and modernism in Siam is unique among most Theravada Buddhist countries encountering the West in that it originated among the ruling elite and was put in the service of a relatively secure royal regime seeking to preserve its fortunes. Elsewhere it was more common for reformist modernism to be taken up by minorities or non-elites who were newly influential due to

their culture and religion against the rising intellectual challenges emerging through dialogue with the colonial West, this increasingly cosmopolitan elite embodied several general characteristics: intellectual skepticism, a respect for empiricism, a pragmatic and even eclectic revisionism, a valorization of modern technology, and a confident desire to reconcile Buddhism and Western science (Reynolds 1976). They were interested in mastering and assimilating various forms of Western knowledge – such as, medicine, engineering, military sciences, chemistry, astronomy – that were simultaneously prestigious, powerful and potentially threatening. At the same time, they subjected traditional Thai religious and cosmological beliefs to demythologization from a naturalist, scientific perspective, thus signaling a new understanding and redefinition of Buddhism, religion, morality, rationality and causality.<sup>107</sup>

Out of this social project of romantic revival, embattled recuperation and cultural self-critique on terms, in part, established by their Western challengers, a select group of Siamese elites gave birth to a sensibility of modernist reform inflected through the geo-politics of colonial mimesis. As modernist reformers and revivalists, this small ‘revolutionary’ elite was creating a new religious heritage through polemical historiography, in which virtuous mythic origins and an invented tradition served as a response to the perceived triple threat of dominating foreigners, mistaken peers and ignorant masses. While appropriating a widespread dichotomizing logic within modern Western thought – the “natural” versus the “moral” – in order to preserve the authority and relevance of Buddhism as a religion, these cosmopolitan reformers of Siam in the

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the pressures of colonial rule and who stood in opposition to a declining traditional establishment. See Tambiah (1976: 215-219), for instance, for one such comparison.

<sup>107</sup> Reynolds considers this cosmological critique to constitute a definitive intellectual rupture with the past: “an era had really passed: the mold had been broken” (Reynolds 1976: 218). Johnson describes how most of the various biographers of Mongkut as well as commentators on the religious reforms he initiated – Griswold, Lingat, Ishii, Bradley, Reynolds – appeal to Mongkut’s repudiation of the *Traiphum* cosmology and his attack on the supposedly empty ceremonialism and superstition of popular religion as the hallmark of a wider cultural shift from a magical, ritualistic religion to a moral, rational, pure religion which is “merely one step shy of a scientific worldview” (1997: 243-245).



mid-nineteenth century also appropriated a broader set of related distinctions which distinguished the ethical, rational form of true religion from the amoral, irrational manifestations of false magic and supernaturalism. For Buddhist reformers, the pristine Pali canonical tradition properly understood represented the ethical, rational, true religiosity of the Buddha's teachings, while popularized accretions of, and concessions to, Brahmanism and animism that had attached themselves to Siamese Buddhism over the centuries were seen as a false, amoral and irrational magic and superstition. Implicit within this contrast was the assumption that the reformers' progressive rediscovery of the authentic, rational Buddhism entailed the recovery of a more enlightened and evolved form of religiosity, and that this form of religion historically followed and superseded first animism and then Brahmanism as modes of religiosity.<sup>108</sup>

As discursive concepts in modern reformist Thai thought, the categories of magic and superstition are mutually constitutive. Magic is typically translated as *saiyasat* and refers loosely to the study of those manipulative, even occult, esoteric knowledges which are seen as base and amoral in character. These forms of knowledge and practice are also frequently perceived as non-Buddhist in either character or origin within the framework of modernist reform Buddhism. As a classificatory category, superstition is even more loosely defined, and includes ideas such as *khwam chuea thu thang saiyasat* (belief in magic), *kan thu phi thu sang* (belief in spirits), *khwam chuea thi phit* (wrong beliefs), *khwam chuea ngom ngai* (foolish beliefs), and *khwam*

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<sup>108</sup> In this intellectual project of theological and historical reimagination, local intellectual elites were over time joined by Western scholars who in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were only just discovering and constituting "Buddhism" as one of a series of world historical religions. Almond (1988) is the classic account of the Western scholarly discovery of Buddhism as an authentic religion recovered from scriptures and placed in opposition to the degradations of actually existing Buddhism on the ground. Masuzawa (2005) describes the birth of Buddhism as a spiritual tradition according to the Western scholarly template of "the world religions." Beyer (2006) describes the constitution of Buddhism as a particular ideological and institutional exemplification of the generalized category of 'religion' which emerges within the historical constitution of a modern global society. Hallisey (1995) describes how Western scholars and Asian intellectuals and elites were engaged in a collaborative project of reimagining and reconstituting Theravada Buddhism in the colonial era. Lopez (2002) provides a succinct, globally generalized description of the modernist Buddhism that resulted from this collaborative reimagining of Buddhism as a world religion and an historical form of practice.

*klua yang mai mi hetphol* (irrational fear).<sup>109</sup> In pragmatic terms, magic and superstition refer to a disparate variety of beliefs, practices and material artifacts. These range from the manipulation of amoral protective power accessed through amulets (*phra khrueang*), spells and incantations (*khatha*), and sacralized cloths (*pha yan*), to the propitiation of spirits for worldly gain, regardless of whether these are locality spirits, nature spirits, or ancestral and lineage spirits. Astrology (*horasat*) and spirit possession (*song jao khao phi*) are also typically categorized as magical and superstitious in nature (Jackson 1989: 57). From the perspective of modernist reform Buddhism, each of these particular constellations of belief and practice is fundamentally irrational, false, and deceptive, or they involve engagement with immoral supernatural powers. In both of these contrasting senses, then, magic and superstition, from the modernist perspective, are typically perceived as historically originating out of Brahmanism and animism and standing in sharp opposition to the rational, true, and moral beliefs and practices rooted in the authentic core of Buddhist teachings.

Associated with this reclassification of beliefs, practices or objects according to the categories of science, religion and magic is a rethinking of the idea of (religious) truth. In the classical vision of religious truth within Theravada Buddhism, human understanding of the liberating knowledge conveyed by the Buddha was perceived as existing along a continuum from absolute ignorance to absolute wisdom, and any person's position on that continuum was the result of their karmic heritage and meritorious actions. Notions of karma and practices of merit-making followed by the lay populace and legitimated within traditional cosmologies were valid and virtuous, even in their worldly thaumaturgic ends, as relative approximations of the ultimate soteriological truths about impermanence, suffering, no-self and nirvana ideally followed by the virtuoso, renunciatory monastic elites (Jackson 1989: 44-45). As modernist Siamese reformers

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<sup>109</sup> Wit (1994: 1396).

reconceptualized Buddhism to meet the ideological challenge of colonial Western rationalism, empiricism and science, however, “all ideas [were] classified as falling into one of two mutually exclusive categories – true or false. No gradations or approximations of truth [were] permitted.” As a result, “the ignorant approximations to truth of the traditional beliefs of the lay person are no longer any truth at all, but rather are falsehoods to be totally rejected” (Jackson 1989: 45).<sup>110</sup>

All of this foundational ideological reimagining of the reality and value of religious practice opened up by a modernist reform sensibility has had enduring consequences for how some Thais interpret devotion to and supplication of supramundane entities in the cosmological pantheon. From the perspective of modernist reform Buddhism, these acts are, strictly speaking, thoroughly erroneous, misguided, and improper. First of all, these supramundane entities – gods, ghosts and spirits envisioned as supernatural forces which can intervene in miraculous ways in the empirical world – do not really exist for a strict modernist reform Buddhist. They are merely a psychological prop which can fool people into acting virtuously. Thus, at best they are skillful fictions, at worst erroneous delusions. In addition, for a modernist reform Buddhist the symbolic logic of interaction with these supramundane entities is viewed in stark dichotomous terms. Rather than an act of imperfect virtue, devotion and propitiation is viewed as mistaken and misguided because it is essentially self-interested manipulation rather than virtuous service. As such, it is not in conformity with the underlying ethical principles supposedly embodied by the true and pure core of canonical Buddhist teachings. Finally, rather than being concerned with transcendent ends and the ultimate, single truth of soteriological salvation, the devotional

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<sup>110</sup> This reinterpretation of heterogeneity and pluralism according to modernist Western rationalist presumptions was not limited to Thailand or even Theravada Buddhism. It characterized one strand of religious reformism emerging in the nineteenth century across colonial South and Southeast Asia. Fuller, for example, speaks in almost identical terms with regards to Hindu Brahmanical reformism in modern India. “Moreover, if reformism is traditionally Brahmanical in tone, it also introduces something both radical and new. Popular ‘superstitious’ practices, like animal sacrifice, are no longer just devalued as inferior; they are now condemned as wrong and not even part of authentic Hinduism. Hence the complementarity relationship between high and low gives way to a bifurcation into true and false” (Fuller 1992: 101).

propitiation of gods and spirits is focused primarily on worldly goals and the alleviation of mundane suffering. From the modernist reform Buddhist perspective, these pursuits are not approximations of soteriological salvation or first steps on a nobler path; they are rather improper distractions from the pursuit of more virtuous and more appropriate soteriological ends.

As a result, the magical and the supernatural can now all be conceptualized as dangerously appealing forms of irrationality and immorality which threaten Buddhism and society more generally. This fear that the magical and the supernatural potentially threaten to undermine Buddhism from within has appeared frequently in reformist discourse since the mid-nineteenth century, and it frequently surfaces in the opinions of contemporary reformist monks and commentators. Thus, a monk writing in the Thammayut Order journal *Thammajaksu* in 1987 worries that: “Thai society might reject religion [*sasana*, that is, Buddhism] and return to relying on *saiyaasaat*, astrology, and mediumship, until we lose ourselves and abandon the use of reason and wisdom in conducting our lives...If we really reached such a point it would show that society had begun returning to the dark ages” (cited in Jackson 1989: 58).<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> It is important to note, however, that the hegemonic influence of modernist reform Buddhism as a religious regime has been limited by its historically partial and uneven critical application to specific religious phenomena. Thus, although certain popular beliefs and practices (such as astrology, amulets or the use of spells and incantations) have been more consistently criticized by reformist monks, other beliefs and practices (such as royal Brahmanical rituals or newly invented national Buddhist rituals) have been subject to much less, if any, criticism from this perspective. This partial and uneven application of reform Buddhist ideology since the time of Mongkut to the present has been noted by many scholars, with some arguing that it points to fundamental ambiguities and contradictions within the symbolic and social logic of modernist reform Thai Buddhism as an historical and ideological movement. So for example, Johnson finds that despite Mongkut’s supposed zeal in purging Buddhism of superstitious myths and rituals, he also reinstated older Brahmanic rituals like the festival of Siva’s night, and intensified the Brahmanic overtones of the royal tonsure ceremony (Johnson 1997: 247). Likewise, Swearer observes that “an undue emphasis on Mongkut as rational reformer must be qualified by the fact that he continued to believe in *devas*, practiced astrology, and reported miracles arising from his own vows of truth” (Swearer 1999: 199). Jackson argues more broadly that Mongkut’s reforms of purification were “partial” and “incomplete” because they targeted only local and regional forms of Thai religiosity as supernatural, and failed to carry this critique over into the royalist Buddhism of the centralizing Chakri dynasty. Instead, once Mongkut became king, he continued to support the traditional cosmology while supporting and even intensifying the Brahmanical, and supposedly superstitious, elements of royal rituals (Jackson 1989: 43-47).

Tambiah (1976: 406) also comments on this refurbishing of institutional worship by noting how Mongkut’s reformist, scripturalism, and rationalist movement, which began with a condemnation of superstition and ritual, eventually fostered its own cultic forms of worship as Mongkut composed new *paritta* chants and prayers and

A minority of Thai monastic and lay religious intellectuals and reformers have preserved the ideological agenda of modernist reform Buddhism into and over the course of the twentieth century, even as a naturalistic, scientific cosmology has slowly and unevenly spread amongst segments of the cultural elite through secular education abroad and at home. One historically prominent and culturally influential advocate of a rationalized, “scientific” interpretation of Thai Buddhism in a modernist reform vein was Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. A dominant intellectual figure who spanned the twentieth century, Buddhadasa was a sharp and unyielding critic of what he saw as foolish and erroneous beliefs in ghosts, spirits and magic that might be explained as resulting from collective hypnosis. In denying the ontological reality of supernatural beings in general, “Buddhadasa gives supernatural beings such as *thewada* and demons only an abstract existence. For him demons and *thewada* are no more than mental states and have no concrete or material existence” (Jackson 2003: 108-109). Moreover, he roundly criticized spirit cults as an uncivilized animism that contaminated Buddhism while interpreting certain interpretive

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promoted new Buddhist festivals such as Wisakha Bucha and Makha Bucha which were ideally to be celebrated by all Siamese Buddhists. Tambiah focuses on the more Buddhist and canonical forms of cultic worship, however, while Jackson highlights the royal and Brahmanical elements in Mongkut’s project of refurbished cultic worship.

In a compelling analysis, Jackson explicitly argues that the partial, uneven and contradictory character of elite Siamese reform Buddhism vis-à-vis popular and vernacular religiosity reflects the influence of Siam’s particular history and political economy. In order to counter the threat of Western imperial domination and potential colonization, the Chakri dynasty – beginning with King Mongkut and continuing through until the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932 – sought to foster a political absolutism of royalist nationalism centered on itself. Consequently, it needed to undermine any regional political, economic or cultural authorities that might contest its rising dominance. Thus, reformist criticisms of local and regional religious beliefs and practices as inauthentic, superstitious and magical assisted in delegitimizing the cultural and religious foundations which supported regional political elites. At the same time, the elaboration and celebration (in a non-reformist vein) of the mythological and supernatural elements in Chakri royal ritual and ideology helped to buttress and expand the political and religious legitimacy of the Chakri dynasty as one of the key unifying cultural pillars of the emerging Siamese nation-state. In this sense, the partial and contradictory ideological character of modernist reform Buddhist discourse in its actual historical application was a direct consequence of the particular political economic challenges facing Siam as it pursued a strategy of modern nation-state building in a colonial milieu (Jackson 1989: 46). Thus, the more radical and revolutionary potential of universal critique contained within the modernist reforms begun by Mongkut and developed further by later generations was stymied and contained by the significant role that an elite-led, royal-supported reform Buddhism had to play in that absolutist cultural nationalism which constituted Siam’s principle mode of response to the threat of Western colonial domination. The result was a contradiction of and between ideology and application within the modernist reform Buddhist sensibility itself.

deviations from canonical Pali orthodoxy as distortions produced through the malicious influence of Brahmanism. Widely considered one of Thailand's most important and influential Buddhist philosophers, Buddhadasa's particular demythologized vision of Buddhism in a modernist reform framework was and continues to be an ideological point of intellectual reference and guidance for many educated, middle-class and professional Thais who struggled against entrenched social interests during and after the 1970s.<sup>112</sup>

Buddhadasa has served as a popular point of reference and authority for a diverse range of modernist reform perspectives in the post World War II. Whether monk or layperson, direct or imagined disciple, many critics of the degradations, superstitions and failings of modern Thai Buddhism take inspiration from Buddhadasa's teachings. Thus individuals and groups as diverse as Santi Asoke, Sulak Sivaraksa, Phra Visalo and Phra Payom see their reformist criticisms of contemporary Thai Buddhism and contemporary Thai religiosity as carrying on the cleansing and clarifying reformist agenda championed by Buddhadasa. These critics often focus publicly on the mistaken beliefs and practices of their fellow Thais. Not surprisingly, spirit possession and a belief in and reliance upon the magical assistance and protection of divinities is a popular example of supernaturalist confusion, as it was in August of 1998 for a monk from Surat Thani seeking to educate the confused masses in a small temple on the edge of small town in rural Chumphon.

*Professional Spirit Mediums and Modernist Reform Buddhism in the Context of Forest Robe Donation Ceremonies.* The criticisms offered up multiple times and in various iterations by

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<sup>112</sup> Many different groups, religious and otherwise, have and continue to look to Buddhadasa as a source of inspiration given his sustained criticism of the status quo and the establishment, religious or otherwise, from the perspective of individual rationality. Groups in the 1970s opposing military rule and foreign influence and endorsing democratization turned to him for inspiration, just as advocates of engaged Buddhism, environmentalism, local autonomy, and alternative or sustainable development would turn to him for inspiration in later decades. See Jackson 2003 (275-298) and Ito 2012 for a more comprehensive discussion of Buddhadasa's intellectual and social legacy and influence.

the Surat Thani monk over the course of the forest robe donation ceremony at Wat Tonwikul are almost stereotypically representative of a general modernist reform Buddhist sensibility. As he reiterated several times, spirit possession and a belief in the protective powers of *thep* were ontologically mistaken, pragmatically misguided, a consequence of foreign pollution, and a betrayal of the original, true teaching of the historical Buddha. They bore all the signs of magical confusion and superstitious error, and were described through language and metaphors that indexed these modernist discourses. Moreover, he delivered these pronouncements in an increasingly forceful and confrontational manner explicitly envisioned as a pedagogical intervention in reformist correction. He wanted to teach, convince and convert his audience to a more correct understanding of Buddhism, so much so that he sought rather vainly to turn a temple sermon and a merit-making ritual into a classroom debate.

As a confrontation between the religious regime of modernist reform Buddhism and the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums this occasion stood out as unique, however, for a number of reasons. First, there was its tone and style. The monk's pronouncements had a sustained and intense quality not typically found in most conventional or 'traditional' monastic oral sermonizing and pedagogical instruction. Equally unusual was its direct and confrontational character, as the Surat Thani monk pointed his criticisms specifically at beliefs and practices he seemed fully aware were central to his audience's basic assumptions in the hopes of provoking responses which he could then interrogate even further. Also, his criticisms were not just pronouncements and declarations of instruction from a perspective of official or orthodox clarification, but he sought an engaged give and take, a debate and discussion. Although Bangkok professional spirit mediums and their entourages are perfectly aware of criticisms of their beliefs and practices from a modernist reform Buddhist perspective, they rarely encounter

them as intensely sustained, directly confrontational, and interactively engaged. Instead, they are more typically encountered within their general cultural milieu as diffusely sporadic, indirect and glancing, and monologically disengaged.

This unusual tone and style was in this sense perhaps a reflection of a second unique characteristic of this moment of modernist reform criticism of the subculture's grounding presumptions: it occurred as an open and public declaration delivered in a face-to-face encounter of relative social intimacy. During all my time in the field this occasion was the first and only time I personally witnessed such a direct, open, public and intimate personal attack on spirit possession from a modernist reform perspective. More typically, such critiques surfaced on the periphery and in the interstices of the subculture's daily life via mass mediated pronouncements. Thus, it was more common for such criticisms to arrive within the subculture via an awareness of publicized denouncements by modernist reformers circulating in the print or televised mass media. The two most common genres of such criticisms were campaigns for reform against superstition initiated by monks and investigative accounts by journalists – either in print or more dramatically televised formats – designed to expose the deception and chicanery seen as defining of the work of spirit mediums (White 2005).

The semi-regularity of such modernist reform critiques was a taken-for-granted presumption of the professional spirit mediums I encountered in Bangkok, and it informed their guarded and strategic interactions with outsiders of a certain type (unknown monks, journalists) who occasionally wandered into their abodes or through their ritual events. Through a variety of techniques, they managed access and exposure to their subcultural world by these and other potential critics precisely in order to limit their exposure to such attacks. Moreover, it was the rare brave and confrontational individual who would raise such modernist criticisms in a direct,



open, sustained and confrontational face-to-face manner in the physical settings or ritual occasions over which the professional spirit mediums exerted direct social control, even if they were willing to violate a general normative attitude expressed repeatedly in Thai society that “you may not believe, but do not offend/insult” (*mai chuea, ya lop lu*).<sup>113</sup> But the robe donation ceremony at Wat Tonwikul was occurring on spatial and cultural terrain outside the control of professional spirit mediums and was thematically framed as not only authoritatively and foundationally Buddhist but also as appropriately pedagogic as well. It thus constituted a moment in which a properly motivated figure of religious authority could reasonably and justifiably subject the subculture to a style, rhetoric and performance of criticism which was rare.

As a result, the response of Sam and his entourage was both similar and different from the responses I had witnessed previously within the subculture to mass mediated denunciations of spirit possession. In both cases one witnessed a recourse to detailed narratives of personal experience that validated the reality of spirit possession and the virtuous efficacy of *jao* and *thep* within the world. Similarly, in both cases there was an appeal to the freedom of individual conscience and the need for each person to apply his or her own judgment in seeking to determine the plausibility of something that, it was argued, cannot be definitively proven as true or false. The suggestion that those who deny the reality or efficacy of spirit possession are suffering from an overly narrow or uninformed perspective was also similar. Given the social absence of the critics in the case of mass mediated modernist reform criticisms, however, when such opinions circulate within the daily life of abodes, mediums and the subculture they often provoke very direct, pointed and even denunciatory counter criticisms. The moral and religious failings of critics, personally or as a categorical type, are not uncommon, and given the

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<sup>113</sup> This proclamation can be interpreted as a succinct summary of the underlying ethos animating the religious regime of inclusive syncretic Buddhism, in fact.

continuous stream of monastic scandals covered in the mass media such criticisms are easy to make and easy to persuade with as well. Mediums responding to distant critics are also prone to making boastful counterclaims, challenging critics to test the reality of their possessing divinities or the efficacious supramundane powers that they channel, charging in essence that although the denunciations of other mediums *may* be fair, they would prove incorrect in their case.

At Wat Tonwikul, however, the responses to the Surat Thani monk's criticisms of supernaturalism and spirit possession were oblique rather than direct, general rather than personal. And there was no call for any challenge or testing that would prove the authenticity and power of possession. To what degree these characteristics were a consequences of the fact that the critic was personally present, that the critic was a monastic empowered to occupy a position of pedagogical instruction by the ritual setting, that the ritual setting was occurring outside the spatial and ceremonial context of the subculture, that no spirit medium per se as a type of ritual actor was technically socially present to respond, or that general interactive norms render most Thais uncomfortable with face-to-face confrontation is ultimately unclear. As an experience of oblique, general and ultimately displaced contestation, however, it nonetheless rendered segments of the witnessing audience progressively unsettled even as, or perhaps precisely because, there was no definitive conclusion or resolution, even rhetorically. And ironically, this unresolved character to the "conversation" and contestation over spirit possession at Wat Tonwikul actually confirmed, in many ways, the general status of professional spirit mediumship within Thai society as a stigmatized, marginal, disreputable yet nonetheless consistently popular mode of religious experience and behavior.

### **Establishment State Buddhism and Bangkok Professional Spirit Mediums**

Occasionally one hears or reads Thais in Bangkok referring to elements of the heterogeneity of Thai religious beliefs, practices and actors in vaguely humanistic and social scientific, even functionalist terms. The collection of amulets, the worshiping of local tutelary spirits at household shrines, the recourse to rituals to extend one's fate and karmic well-being, the uses of astrology or palm reading for prognostication, the reliance upon mass exorcism ceremonies (*suad phan yak*) – these are all examples of customary (*prapheni*) or folk (*khanom thamniam*) beliefs. Such language, metaphors and interpretive frames present certain religious ideas and actions as not so much false, ignorant or deceptive, as quaint, backwards and a tad nostalgic of a social world left behind by modern progress. Certain scholars and journalists can easily slip into this perspective, but the Thai state's valorization of and celebratory provocation of certain types of cultural heritage (*morodok wathanatham*) – both royal and aristocratic as well as provincial and rural – has also over recent decades circulated such frames more widely across the social landscape. From this perspective, although the speakers are ambiguously agnostic about the metaphysical or ontological reality of the religious beliefs and rituals framed as custom and folklore, they endorse and valorize them for the various positive social functions they provide to both individuals and groups: they quell anxiety, they foster social solidarity, they create personal meaning, they harmonically regulate relations between humans and the natural environment, they resolve enduring existential dilemmas, they improve psychic and social health, they celebrate and fix collective memory and history. At times within, on the boundaries or outside of the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums one hears individuals speak about spirit possession in such language and according to such presumptions.

These sorts of interpretations of religious practice and belief are the unlikely and ironic consequence of a general centralizing and standardizing cultural project that has accompanied

the long project of nation building that Siam began in the late nineteenth century. Just as the project of nation building fostered modular (if unevenly shared) social, cultural and political forms across the territory of the new geo-body of Siam (and subsequently Thailand), so too did the project create the social reality and ideological fantasy of a common, standardized and centralized Buddhism and religious culture shared by everyone. This Buddhism, however, was less a particular or singular sectarian theology, lineage of ordination or soteriological orthodoxy than a Buddhist moral order of iterative social and ritual forms envisioned as the domesticated civilizational and cultural heritage of an eternal national community. A vision of Buddhism as the ethically upright, socially harmonious, and properly regulated moral heritage of a national community that celebrated the same ritual calendar, performed the same ceremonial activities, obeyed the same ritual hierarchies, pursued the same religious ends, and supported the same institutional imperatives animated the idea of an establishment state Buddhism designed to both buttress and consolidate the project of turning a Chakri Siamese kingdom into a modern nation state. Although religious actors, practices and institutions – such as spirit possession and spirit mediumship – that did not conform to this normative vision of official national religiosity were excluded from this project of creating an establishment state Buddhism, they were nonetheless somewhat recuperable as local or backwards customary heritage of limited social utility according to the ideology of primitive folk culture that accompanied the emerging nationalist social imaginary.

The rise and expansion of establishment state Buddhism as a framework for making sense of Thai Buddhism – as both a monastic institution and a religious culture – arose as part of King Chulalongkorn's administrative and political reforms during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These reforms, prompted by the threat of Western colonialism and modeled

after Siam's colonial neighbors, were designed to simultaneously preserve and increase the authority of the absolute monarchy while also transforming a previously loosely integrated polity into an effectively integrated modern nation-state. In 1892 Chulalongkorn implemented a far-reaching transformation in the basic administrative structure of Siam, replacing a stratified, decentralized system of complexly overlapping domains of authority with a colonial-inspired integrated and centralized administrative system of functionally specific ministries organized through a streamlined hierarchy of regional, provincial and district level territorial authorities.<sup>114</sup>

In order to more tightly integrate previously more autonomous provincial and outlying areas into the emerging Siamese nation-state, Chulalongkorn undermined the old regional elites and replaced them with a new class of administrative elites and officials who were loyal to the Chakri throne and its absolutist regime. In pursuit of this end, he began implementing a policy of bureaucratic centralization, rationalization and standardization across multiple domains of Siamese life, from the administrative to the political, from the economic to the cultural. The reform of the Siamese Sangha formally and strategically paralleled the 1892 reform of provincial administration.

Chulalongkorn's religious reforms were designed to correct improper and 'non-canonical' religious teachings (Ishii 1986: 86), to counter religiously inspired millenarian rebellions (Keyes 1977a), and to undermine regional religious traditions that might provide a foundation for resistance to the centralization of royal political authority under the Chakri dynasty (Jackson 1989: 70). The reforms also sought to extend monarchical control over all monasteries and the appointment of all monastic officials in the kingdom, severing their traditional reliance on local populations and regional elites (Ishii 1986: 71-72). The shallow reach of any country-wide ecclesiastical hierarchy and the ill-defined lines of communication

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<sup>114</sup> The classic analysis of the administrative reforms is Bunnag (1977).

and control extending from Bangkok into the provinces was made clear when efforts in 1898 to use the Sangha's network of temples and monks as the institutional backbone for propagating primary education throughout the kingdom failed (Tambiah 1976: 219-223, 233).

In response, Prince Wachirayan, head of the Sangha, and his half-brother Prince Damrong, Minister of the Interior, reorganized the Sangha into a more comprehensive, coordinated, and standardized ecclesiastical organization. The Sangha Act of 1902 laid the foundations for an administratively centralized and bureaucratized Buddhist Sangha of order, stability and uniformity. The act brought for the first time all monks and monasteries in the kingdom under royal control and legally subordinated all Siamese monks under the governmental rule of the absolute monarchy (Ishii 1986: 72). The ecclesiastical hierarchy was organized along an ascending scale of territorial encompassment and the top echelons were composed of regional Sangha governors, the Council of Elders and the ultimate head of the whole Sangha, the supreme patriarch, all appointed by the King (Jackson 1989: 68-69). As more detailed ordinances and regulations followed, the reorganization "by the mid-1920s, produced a degree of centralization unprecedented in the Thai Sangha" (Ishii 1986: 72).

This institutional centralization fueled increasing state ideological control over the standardized interpretation of Siamese Theravada Buddhism propagated by the newly authoritative Sangha administrative hierarchy. Using its expanded administrative control, the monarchy wrote a series of standardized basic doctrinal textbooks, standardized the system of monastic education, and revised the system of monastic examinations.<sup>115</sup> All of these actions constituted a direct attack upon the great diversity of viewpoints and interpretive traditions

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<sup>115</sup> Ishii (1986: 81-99) provides a detailed discussion of the establishment, significance and logic of the ecclesiastical examination system from the pre-Wachirayan precursors to the present era.

existing within the kingdom and plural understandings of Buddhism based on local vernacular literatures rather than the Pali canonical scriptures or state doctrinal textbooks (Ishii 1986: 86).

The result of all this centralization, bureaucratization, and standardization was the creation of an administratively and pedagogically robust “establishment Buddhism.”<sup>116</sup> The strength of this state-controlled Buddhism – and its ability to propagate and enforce a particular vision of Buddhist history, culture and civilization – resided in many novel organizational features, including: the creation of a centralized national Sangha organization which united a variety of congregational orders into a single hierarchy of administration, control over admission to the Sangha via both qualification restrictions on potential monks or novices and the ability to ordain new monks being limited to only those monks authorized to do so by the supreme patriarch, the registration of all monks who entered the Sangha, a standardized monastic curriculum system implemented across the kingdom, an elaborate national system of monastic titles and privileges which drew monks into the new administrative hierarchy and constrained their autonomy, and a standardization of Buddhist rituals for monks and laity alike (Swearer 1999: 202, Ishii 1986: 72-77, Keyes 1989: 58). As a result, the Buddhism referred to by Chulalongkorn’s successor, King Vajiravudh, in the 1930s as one of the three pillars of Thai identity – the other two pillars being the nation and the monarchy – “was not Buddhism in general . . . rather, it was the Buddhism contained in the religious curriculum devised by Prince Vajiranana and practiced and taught by monks who recognized the authority of the legally constituted sangha” (Keyes 1989: 59).

This drive towards standardization and centralization also extended into the wider Buddhist culture practiced by the laity. Thus for instance, as part of a project of freeing Thai

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<sup>116</sup> The term “establishment Buddhism” is taken from the work of Keyes. See, for instance, Keyes (1989), Keyes (1999a), Keyes (1999b).

Buddhism from polluting foreign accretions and religious nonsense in combination with undermining local visions of authority at odds with its own, the Chakri royal court and its state institutions redefined the Jatakas as superstitious folklore. In the process they sought to undermine their centrality within regional and upcountry popular Buddhist sermonizing and culture, while replacing them with official and authentic teachings and scriptures canonized within a newly constituted establishment state tradition of popular literature and pedagogy (Jory 2002). Similarly, various royal and state actors sought to create comprehensive and standardized ritual and liturgical chanting manuals designed to instruct individuals in proper and modular foundational practices (McDaniel 2011: 120-160). Although local and regional authorities subsequently took up the same project, creating an expanding substantive diversity of standardized forms of Buddhist practice on the ground, the resources, prestige and authority of the royalist state institutions often held a privileged public position in framing and defining authoritative national religious culture among the nation's populace.

As a result, the institutional autonomy, interpretive authority, and social influence of local, regional and ethnic traditions of Siamese Buddhist thought and practice not recognized by the legally constituted bureaucratic Sangha was undermined, displaced, and sometimes even destroyed. "Modern state Buddhism (modeled after the Thammayut sect) bore little resemblance to the religious traditions of rural communities. It had a different set of texts and a new language and culture; it celebrated different religious days and ceremonies; it promoted unfamiliar forms of behavior, symbols and ways of seeing" (Kamala 1997: 43). The first decades of the twentieth century in Siam, in fact, witnessed a complex history of accommodation, resistance, and rejection by various traditions and forms of Buddhism that were incompatible with the establishment state Buddhism propagated by the absolute monarchy and the newly reorganized



national Sangha.<sup>117</sup> By the 1930s, however, the worst of the localized turbulence and resistance seems to have passed, and establishment Buddhism became institutionally and ideologically dominant as the official, legitimate, public form of Theravada Buddhism which was regulated and defended by state authorities, financially supported by Siam's political and economic elites, and increasingly, if still very unevenly, accepted by a growing percentage of the progressively educated populace at large as its normative religious frame of reference. Regional, ethnic and local diversity within Siamese Theravada Buddhism was not simply eradicated, however. Rather, those traditions, beliefs and practices not in agreement with the vision of establishment Buddhism were reformed or, if reform was impossible, rendered suspect and in need of justification if benignly tolerated.

Underlying this institutional and ideological contest between the vision of establishment state Buddhism and its various competitors was a deeper conflict over the presence, authenticity and legitimacy of differing conceptions and sources of religious charisma, sacral efficacy and moral authority across the Siamese socio-religious landscape. The project to culturally standardize and institutionally centralize the Sangha and its members worked to increasingly limit legitimate religious charisma, sacral efficacy and moral authority to only those official, legal members of the Sangha who could display a thorough understanding of the state-sanctioned Buddhist scriptures and teachings, who adhered to the bureaucratic monastic code of conduct now demanded by the state, and who performed and propagated the new religious culture endorsed by the state. As a result, local monastic practices and esoteric forms of knowledge and ritual not in conformity with establishment Buddhism's religious culture were treated as

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<sup>117</sup> Swearer (1999: 202-208) provides a good, concise summary of these various reactions to centralization, including the most famous cases of resistance by Khruba Siwichai on behalf of the northern Yuan tradition of Theravada Buddhism and the scattered "holy man" (*phu mi bun*) rebellions of the Northeast in the early decades of the twentieth century. Also see Kamala (1997: 43-46) and Keyes (1971).

questionable or illegitimate sources of charisma, efficacy and authority in the eyes of elites (Keyes 1999a: 4-7).

Traditionally, any ordained monk who faithfully observed the monastic rules of discipline was perceived to possess a special quality that set him morally above and apart from the mundane, worldly social order. In addition though, “some monks, especially those who have spent significant periods away from the world practicing meditation, are deemed to have even a more transcendent quality, that of *barami*, ‘charisma’ or ‘virtuousness,’ that marks them even as more religiously potent than ordinary monks” (Keyes 1999b: 123). Only those individuals who display extraordinary personal virtue and possess an unusually pronounced and powerful karmic heritage, both of which indicated numerous past lives characterized by great merit and great morality, are interpreted as possessing *barami*. (Keyes 1999b: 5).<sup>118</sup> *Barami* is derived from the canonical Pali concept of *parami*, which are the ten virtuous perfections achieved by a bodhisattva on his path to obtaining Buddhahood: generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom, vigor, forbearance, truthfulness, resolution, loving-kindness, and equanimity (Seri 1988: 153-154).

As the association with the idea of the bodhisattva implies, *barami* therefore is typically attributed to those individuals who avidly pursue and strongly exemplify the ultimate soteriological goal of renunciation, asceticism and meditative insight. These individuals are considered especially efficacious in their actions in the world in part because of the moral authority they naturally radiate and which others recognize and defer to, and in part because of the extraordinary supramundane powers, known as *itthirit*, which they realize and master as a result of advanced meditative practices. From the establishment state Buddhist perspective,

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<sup>118</sup> These individuals are typically described as having either *barami* or *bun barami*. The latter formulation simply adds *bun*, merit, to the concept, making more explicit the association of *barami* with meritorious action and karma within the Theravada Buddhist worldview.

however, it was important to make clear that the only kind of charismatic authority and efficacy which counted socially and practically was a Buddhist charisma that conformed with their understanding of the true, authentic canonical Buddhism, and moreover, that the only way to access and be a repository of this Buddhist charisma was to subject oneself to the reformed discipline of the newly-constituted legal national Sangha.

Consequently, authentic religious charisma and moral authority was, from the perspective of an increasingly powerful establishment state Buddhism, to be institutionally caged within the formal, legal Sangha and ideologically bound up with conformity to its teachings and religious culture. In Weberian terms, although previously the authority and power of the Siamese Sangha as a source of institutionalized charisma and sacrality was primarily traditional in character, after the 1902 Sangha Act it became increasingly legal-bureaucratic in nature as well. Thus, as the newly centralized and bureaucratized modern state captured the ability to more definitively define which monks were properly ordained, sufficiently knowledgeable, and appropriately moral, it also gained a greater ability to shape and control the authority and charisma traditionally associated with both the Sangha and its monastic membership. In sum, “The Sangha Act of 1902 denied personal charisma and created a situation in which only the ‘ex officio charisma’ of monks could sustain popular belief. As a result, salvation became inaccessible to people except through the national ecclesia” (Ishii 1986: 78).

Central to establishment state Buddhism’s religious culture, therefore, is the impulse to dominate the social definition and recognition of authentic Buddhist charisma, efficacy and morality so that only official, obedient members of the legal, national Sangha are seen to possess it. This dynamic is evident in establishment Buddhism’s continuing struggles since the beginning of the twentieth century with all actors – whether monks or other religious virtuosos – who claim

to be in possession of a charismatic authority and sacral efficacy which is distinct from, or even superior to, that which is recognized and celebrated by the state-controlled Sangha. The famous case of Khruba Siwichai, a charismatic monk from the Chiang Mai region who actively resisted the central government's efforts to reform the distinctive customs of northern Thai Buddhism until an accommodation was eventually reached in the 1930s, is a clear example of establishment Buddhism seeking to tame the charismatic presence and moral authority of a monk who appealed to non-establishment traditions of religious teachings, monastic ordination and religious practice as a justification for his subversive actions.<sup>119</sup> Similarly, the *phu wiset* ("magicians") and *phu mi bun* ("holy men"), who led the millenarian rebellions in the Northeast of Siam in the early decades of the twentieth century and claimed possession of miraculous powers, were frequently ex-monks who possessed esoteric knowledge of a non-canonical form which constituted part of the basis underlying their claim to moral leadership. The Siamese state actively suppressed these resistance movements through military means, while the reformed Sangha hierarchy sought to discredit the claimed charisma, sacral efficacy and moral authority of the rebellion's leaders lest it compete with that of establishment Buddhism (Keyes 1977a, Murdoch 1974, Jory 2002).

Equally caught up in this struggle over legitimate charisma, efficacy and authority are those individuals or groups who, less confrontationally than rebellious *phu wiset* and *phu mi bun*, practiced forms of religiosity or claimed to possess esoteric knowledge of a supramundane variety which establishment Buddhism did not recognize or validate as authentic, efficacious or legitimate. As Kamala points out, the reformed ecclesiastical education system undermined the

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<sup>119</sup> P. Cohen (2001) argues that Khruba Siwichai is part of a tradition of religious revivalism in northern Yuan Buddhism which stands opposed to the moral and administrative authority of the modern state and the homogenizing policies of the state Sangha. This revivalism has fused together a tradition of ascetic forest meditation practice and an ideology of sacral kingship, while avoiding millenarian aspirations or explanations. Cohen argues that this tradition of resistance, ranging from strategies of defiance to evasion, has persisted up and into the present era.

reproduction and transmission of many forms of local Buddhist and esoteric knowledge throughout Siam. The new curriculum of orthodox beliefs and practices increasingly displaced forms of popular and vernacular non-canonical knowledge, such as folk medicine, meditation and astrology, which had traditionally been found within monasteries because they typically served as the primary local institutions with a monopoly on literacy and learning. Thus, beliefs and practices passed on through palm-leaf manuscripts and oral communication were displaced and supplanted increasingly by official textbooks imbued with Bangkok's royal court culture and establishment vision (Kamala 1997: 42). In a similar manner, many forms of Brahmanical and esoteric knowledge of a thaumaturgic nature involving divination and the propitiation of supramundane entities also relied on the lineages of learning and expertise which formed around monks and ex-monks affiliated with Buddhist temples. Monasteries and monks more strongly affiliated with the new establishment Buddhism, however, were increasingly likely to perceive these forms of knowledge and practice as less appropriate, authoritative and valuable.

In sum, the institutional transformation which at the beginning of the twentieth century laid the foundation for a unified, centralized and bureaucratized national Sangha also fostered the expansion of an official, public orthodoxy and religious culture of a now state-controlled establishment Buddhism. In order to pursue this goal of a more standardized and homogenized form of Siamese Theravada Buddhism, the absolutist Siamese state and the increasingly powerful ecclesiastical administrative hierarchy under its monarchical control sought to discipline, displace or eradicate those forms of religiosity – newly classified as non-orthodox and illegitimate or as backwards, folk custom – which persisted within the kingdom's borders. Because the regulatory powers of the nationalized Sangha were legally limited to only all monks within the kingdom and because the Chakri throne was primarily concerned with regional forms

of Buddhism that might buttress efforts to resist its agenda of political centralization and unification, much of this policy of religious disciplining seems to have been primarily directed at monks and monasteries that failed to conform with the Bangkok and court-influenced reformist culture of establishment Buddhism. Nonetheless, religious beliefs and practices that did not strictly involve monks and monasteries were also a source of concern that received periodic attention. Hence, for instance, when non-monastic religious specialists turned actively resistant, as with the “holy man” rebellions, the state and the Sangha sought to control them. Likewise, Northeastern ascetic forest monks ordained in the royalist Thammayut order “were active in discrediting popular animistic beliefs prevalent in the northeastern countryside” and on occasion were sanctioned by the provincial government to engage in the “burning of ancestral shrines and ‘ritual objects used for worshiping spirits’” (Taylor 1993a: 116, 118).<sup>120</sup> In general, however, the Siamese state and the national Sangha administration do not seem to have pressed forward with any widespread or systemic campaigns of suppression or eradication against unorthodox popular and vernacular beliefs that were peripheral to the code of monastic discipline, the administration of temples, or the now basic and fundamental canonical teachings.<sup>121</sup> Rather, tactics of repudiation, displacement, and stigmatization seem to have been more typical when dealing with the broader religious culture, especially when more aggressive disciplining proved impossible due to resistance by local populations.

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<sup>120</sup> It is noteworthy that such zealous efforts at reform did antagonize the local population and its monks, and sometimes led to attacks by them, in turn, on the reformist Thammayut forest monks.

<sup>121</sup> My hesitancy in this assertion is a consequence of the fact that, as far as I am aware, no scholar has ever examined in any detail or historical breadth modern Siamese and Thai state policies towards popular, vernacular and syncretic religious beliefs and practices, including campaigns of suppression or eradication. Although one occasionally finds mention of these campaigns in an off-hand way in historical accounts about related topics, no scholar has yet researched them in a focused and coordinated fashion. Consequently, questions of emphasis, ambiguity and contradiction in these campaigns vis-à-vis popular, vernacular and syncretic Buddhist beliefs and practices remain unanswered.

Within this vision of a shared national religious heritage of exemplary civilizational and cultural achievement, certain ideas, practices and actors were easier to domesticate and valorize than others. Elements associated with monks, Pali scriptures and canonically endorsed ritual practices were the easiest, although ethnic and regional diversities complicated this nationalist project of constituting a shared Buddhist culture for all subjects and then citizens. Elements associated with royalist Brahmanical traditions were also more easily assimilated into a vision of establishment state Buddhism given the valorization of the Chakri royal court as central to the propagation and maintenance of Thai Buddhism. Thus, even today a diverse set of royal Brahmanical ceremonies orientated around the virtuous charismatic power of Thai monarchs is a regular and uncontroversial element of the Buddhist ritual calendar of the nation. Religious elements associated with folk Brahmanism and spirit cults, however, were more difficult, and sometimes impossible, to incorporate into the official national religious heritage of the Thai Buddhist nation. And when incorporated, they were more likely to be designated as local articulations of folk and customary heritage rather than as core elements of the celebrated national religious culture. Ecstatic religious experiences, such as spirit possession, were the least amenable to domestication and valorization. Thus, they are granted little public, official recognition within establishment Buddhism's vision of the nation's religious or cultural heritage.

Thus for instance, official state efforts to institutionalize and validate "alternative" Thai traditions of healing employ a rhetoric of local religious wisdom in a naturalistic, bio-medical framework while stripping out of such traditions the esoteric conceptions of knowledge and ecstatic, possession-like experiences conventionally seen as foundational in the discovery and therapeutic application of such knowledge (Del Casino 2004). In a more receptive but similar vein, when spontaneous possession occurs on the margins of state-sponsored reinvented

Brahmanical rites celebrating the procession of gods (*thep*) at World Heritage sites in Northeast Thailand, it is pragmatically and situationally accommodated and recognized but not formally scripted into the ceremonial logic of an event centrally organized around the idea of calling deities and spirits to descend as virtuous witnesses (Denes and Tiamsoon 2013).<sup>122</sup> One is hard pressed, in fact, to identify any narratives or ritual examples of establishment state Buddhism's official celebration of national religious heritage that formally recognizes, validates or valorizes the experience of spirit possession and spirit mediumship except as, at best, a nostalgic marker of the sort of folk custom emblematic of a primitive or backwards religious sensibility which has subsequently been superseded by the civilizational superiority of Buddhism.<sup>123</sup>

*Professional Spirit Mediums and Establishment State Buddhism in the Context of Forest Robe Donation Ceremonies.* The language, logic and framing vision of establishment state Buddhism's regime of value is evident in the statements by local state officials during the robe donation ceremony at Wat Tonwikul. They did not speak about auspiciousness, potency, virtue or miracles (although they did speak in general terms about meritorious and upright moral behavior). Nor did they speak about ontological truth or falsity, honesty and deception, or authenticity and degradation. Instead, they spoke about the value of the religious actions and institutions at hand in terms of cultural heritage and its social utility. The merit making of the robe donation ceremony, and the various practices involved in it, was valorized in terms of their

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<sup>122</sup> It is worth noting that in this case the provincial government's state-sponsored reinvention of propitiation ceremonies at the archeological location, such that royalist inspired Brahmanical veneration of Shiva replaced local mythologies and rituals, led to the co-option and subordination of local spirits, religious cosmologies and actors to such a degree that the local community felt they lost ritual custodianship of the site.

<sup>123</sup> Tanabe's work (1991; 2000b) on the *phi meng* cult of northern Thailand, invested as it is with the symbolism and practice of forms of sacrifice, possession and wildness which has been domesticated in the service of a local Buddhist polity's claim to dominant sovereignty, is emblematic in this regard. In addition, this annual ceremony has become incorporated into celebrations of local northern cultural heritage that in turn are linked to the modern tourism industry in a fashion similar to the celebrations of local religious heritage documented by Denes and Tiamsoon (2013). The one exception to this pattern may be the imagery and discourses surrounding the practice of possession within the Chinese Vegetarian Festival celebrated in the South of Thailand.



general social, personal, environmental and health benefits. The value of the temple and the project of building the Jao Mae Kuan Im statue were justified in terms of their social benefits to the local community and the local economy, and of how completing the statue would provide added value to the local cultural heritage in the competitive tourist market.

No where in any of their commentary in the spirit of establishment state Buddhism's framework of interpretation do they mention spirit mediums or spirit possession. Whether this silence was an oversight or conscious omission isn't clear. Perhaps it was easy to sidestep this offstage dimension of the ceremony because no one at the ritual was performatively occupying the public persona of a spirit medium nor did any act of possession occur. Nonetheless, as local officials one suspects that they were quite aware of the fact that the principal sponsor of the ceremony was a spirit medium and his entourage, given that Sam had been funding the statue building project for years and was a very frequent visitor to the town. Moreover, a long standing local spirit medium was also present in a supporting role during the ritual. Spirit mediums as religious actors and spirit possession as religious behavior, however, has little to no presence within the conventional narratives about national religious heritage, and therefore within the frame of establishment state Buddhism they are read out of the script, replaced instead by figures of devout laity and customs of folk backwardness.

Even within the daily life of entourages in the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums one rarely hears talk of possession and mediums as valuable forms of cultural, religious or civilizational heritage, presumably because commitments of a more intense and personal nature are sought by everyone involved, ranging from mediums to followers to clients. Comments that talk about possession and mediumship as noteworthy or valued religious or folk customs are found instead among individuals who are knowledgeable about the subculture and

its practices yet who are only loosely affiliated with it and who lack strong commitments to or identifications with it members. Thus one finds such language among benignly disposed but agnostic observers living on the edge of the subculture. These observers include the neighbors who live around the abodes of professional spirit mediums yet who don't self-identify as followers or clients, as well as journalists and editors of popular press magazines focused on popular religiosity who sympathetically write about spirit mediums. Media commentators of a tolerant persuasion uninterested in projects of demystification and denouncement also can employ such language. One also can hear such characterizations among monks or the laity of temples who receive financial support from professional spirit mediums and their entourages and who wish to avoid speaking disrespectfully even if they harbor skepticism or doubt. For these individuals, speaking about professional spirit mediums and possession as a folk custom with social utility for some people (which typically means *other* people) or for society in general is a convenient way to avoid taking a strong stand either about the relative auspiciousness or potency of spirit mediums and possession vis-à-vis other religious actors or practices or about the relative truth, authenticity and appropriateness of mediums and possession as Buddhist, religious or moral actors or experiences.

## **Conclusions**

In this chapter I have sought to highlight the plural regimes of religious value and interpretation available for imagining heterogeneity, difference and alterity within contemporary Thai Buddhism. Each constitutes a vision for hierarchically defining, classifying, ranking and organizing the empirical field of diverse religious actors, actions, goals and practices from a perspective orientated primarily with regards to Buddhist values, points of reference or frames of

meaning, however those are variously understood. There is an irreducible plurality, ambiguity and even contradictory character to Theravada Buddhist religiosity as an ideological, social and institutional phenomenon within late twentieth century Thailand. Thai Buddhism is justifiably and undeniably many different things to many different actors, and its interpretive and evaluative possibilities are likewise plural and diverse despite efforts to proclaim a single or determinative Buddhist point of normative reference. As a result, spirit possession and spirit mediums – as one element within the diverse empirical heterogeneity characterizing the field of Thai religiosity – means a variety of different thing depending upon the particular Buddhist regime of value any particular actor is employing at any particular moment.

In this sense, inclusive syncretism, modernist reformism and state establishmentarianism represent three historically contrasting logics of religious hegemony which constitute themselves in part through their production of, and articulation with, the diverse spectrum of actually existing religious beliefs, practices and experiences. *Vis-à-vis* spirit possession the regime of inclusive syncretic Buddhism operates according to a cultural logic of incorporation, subordination and assimilation, even if at times that incorporation, subordination and assimilation is primarily enunciated through the formal hierarchical organization of social practices and symbolic forms and the establishment of the foundations and horizons of religious common sense. *Vis-à-vis* spirit possession the regime of modernist reform Buddhism operates according to a polemical logic of repudiation, denial, and eradication, and is, in part, based on a fundamental critique and denial of inclusive syncretism as an ideological stance, social process and historical orientation. *Vis-à-vis* spirit possession the regime of establishment state Buddhism operates according to a bureaucratic, centralizing logic of exclusion, erasure and non-recognition in which non-normative forms of religiosity are treated as backwards, primitive or trivialized

local folk customs that have no place in the unitary national heritage of an esteemed world historical religion.

It is not the case that in the modern era one regime of religious value, one vision of conceptualizing Thai Buddhism, or one form of religious hegemony simply replaced another or indisputably dominates the religious common sense of the Thai Buddhist imaginaire. Rather, what is observable is the layering of different historical articulations of potential religious hegemonies, with slippage occurring not only within each form of hegemony due to the plurality, ambiguity and contradictions inevitably contained within each hegemonic ideological and social formation on its own terms, but the ambiguity and contradictions existing between each vision of Thai Theravada Buddhist religiosity as well.

This foundational diversity is important for understanding the cultural meaning and social significance of Bangkok professional spirit mediums because it highlights that there is currently no single definitive stance within contemporary Thai Theravada Buddhism from which to interpret and judge spirit possession and spirit mediums. Rather, there exist a variety of shifting perspectives which have achieved at best partial hegemonic dominance at different historical moments, although even during those moments alternative perspectives continued to persist or emerge within the general sociocultural horizon of Thai religiosity. Mainstream Thai Buddhism and Thai religiosity constitutes a complex, internally divided social, cultural and organizational formation, and so consequently its relationship to the phenomenon of spirit possession and mediumship in general, much less professional spirit possession and mediums in particular, is similarly complex, plural and even contradictory in practice.

However, it is important to realize that all three Buddhist regimes of value, all three historical forms of religious hegemony, all three schemas for hierarchically conceptualizing

religious complexity and heterogeneity set clear limits upon the authority and legitimacy that spirit possession as a religious experience and spirit mediums as religious actors can achieve within a sociocultural environment dominated by Thai Theravada Buddhism. All three hegemonic visions of religious value frame spirit possession and spirit mediums as marginal and as subject to varying degrees of disciplining control, although in different ways, for different reasons and with different consequences.

Yet inclusive syncretism offers on the whole a far more accommodating, if only indifferently supportive, ideological and social environment for the expression of spirit possession and the actions of spirit mediums than does either modernist reform Buddhism or establishment state Buddhism. Yet ultimately this accommodation is dependent upon spirit mediums accepting their pronounced subordination and marginality as sources of moral authority, supramundane efficacy and social value even with regards to simply providing thaumaturgic assistance to Buddhist laity in need of worldly assistance. Modernist reform Buddhism's extreme denial of the reality and value of spirit possession and all forms of practice classified as “magical” or “supernatural,” however, denies even this subordinated and marginalized ideological authenticity, authority and legitimacy, and thus social value, to the experience of spirit possession. Establishment state Buddhism, in turn, ascribes no official public or institutional value to possession or mediumship within its organizational and historical vision of Thailand's religious heritage. From this perspective, spirit possession and mediumship constitute a blank absence rather than a negative antithesis. Any value spirit possession may hold from the establishment state perspective is purely psychological or social (i.e. not religious,

soteriological, moral or transcendent) and mostly the unintended and mystified functional consequence of a collective folk delusion among the civilizationally backwards.<sup>124</sup>

However, none of these hegemonic visions of Thai Theravada Buddhist religiosity affirms professional spirit mediums' own understanding of themselves: as individuals possessed by and serving moral and virtuous deities and other supramundane entities from the upper reaches of the cosmological pantheon; as devout Buddhists who can and should be able to directly take part in and support – as spirit mediums – the soteriologically-relevant practices of merit-making mediated by the Sangha and Buddhist monks; as religious virtuosos who are not only empowered by their possession to heal illnesses and prognosticate but who can also perform rituals allowing them to intervene at the more encompassing cosmologically causal level of fate and luck; and as direct benefactors and patrons of Buddhism and collaborators with the Sangha who are publicly committed to materially and socially supporting Buddhism despite the sacrifices these commitments demand of them. Consequently, contemporary Bangkok professional spirit mediums seek to carve out an alternative social and cultural space for themselves within the contested and divided arena of mainstream Thai popular religiosity, a space in which the role, meaning and significance of their lives and activities is not defined strictly in the terms of those regimes of religious value I have identified as inclusive syncretic Buddhism, modernist reform Buddhism or establishment state Buddhism. In order to understand

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<sup>124</sup> In his speculations on the evolutionary conflict between the rationalized world historical religious imaginary and archaic possession trance, Obeyesekere contrasts the Buddhist and Christian resolutions of the conflict. Treating possession trance as irrelevant to the rationalized and ethicized soteriological quest of the monastic virtuoso, Buddhism interacts with possession through a strategy of segregation, marginalization, subordination and stigmatization. Because Christianity's soteriological posture demands a concern with the salvation of the laity in this life, lay practices are stridently ethicized and rationalized as well. Possession, interpreted as victory by the devil, thus renders the sufferer a sinner whose salvation has been jeopardized rather than simply as someone suffering from an illness as in the case with Buddhism. As a result, Christianity demands a much more thorough going posture of intolerance and eradication rather than selective indifference with regards to the threat posed by possession (Obeyesekere 1989: 146). To the degree that modernist reformism in Thai Buddhism reflects, in part, the incorporation of a number of foundational modern Western Christian assumptions about religiosity into the Theravada tradition, one might argue that it is not particularly surprising that it also echoes Christianity's more uncompromising posture concerning the meaning and significance of possession.

the historical changes which have facilitated the emergence of these unusual attitudes among contemporary professional Thai spirit mediums, however, it is necessary to understand the changing fortunes of modernist reform, establishment state and inclusive syncretic Buddhism in the second half of the twentieth century, and that is the subject matter of the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **SOCIO-RELIGIOUS CHANGE AND THE HISTORICAL EMERGENCE OF PROFESSIONAL SPIRIT MEDIUMS**

Modernist reform Buddhism and establishment state Buddhism as intellectually creative reconceptualizations of the Siamese Theravada Buddhist tradition were powerful ideological and institutional forces in the remaking of Siamese society and culture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even if most of their transformative influence as a sustained revolutionary development was felt primarily within the social worlds of those national, regional and urban elites swept up most directly in Siam's modernizing project of nation-building. Ideologically, these religious projects of reinvention valorized Siam's Buddhist heritage and celebrated the ability of its contemporary elites to successfully meet the challenge of Western colonial modernity by refashioning the cognitive worldview, social ethos and historical narrative underlying Siamese civilizational and cultural identity. Institutionally, in combination they played a crucial role in the project of political centralization, social integration and cultural homogenization that animated the nation-building programs pursued initially by an absolutist monarchy and subsequently by the civilian and military political leaders who governed the nation after the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932.

With the passage of time, however, the initial creative vitality of modernist reform Buddhism remained a minority affair among an educated, urban bourgeoisie while establishment state Buddhism ossified as it became an official voice that sought to preserve, rather than rethink, its heritage vision of Buddhism, religiosity, history, and culture. As Thai society and culture experienced fundamental economic, political and social changes during the second half of the



twentieth century, all three Buddhist regimes of value struggled to adapt to a social and cultural world in which an increasing number of Thai Buddhists found themselves located. Moreover, unintended consequences flowing from the ideological and institutional reforms of establishment state Buddhism undermined its continuing appeal, authority and dominance on the religious landscape, while changes in the normative roles of monks and laity also created new dilemmas, needs and interests that it found difficult to address. Thus, “While no one can doubt that the reforms initiated by Mongkut and Wajirayan revitalized Thai Buddhism in the early twentieth century, it is also true that the bureaucratization and centralization of the *sangha* and the standardization of Buddhist thought and practice had a deadening effect on mainstream Thai Buddhism over the long term” (Swearer 1999: 202).

This deadening effect can ultimately be seen in the related twin failures of an establishment Thai Buddhism in decline during the second half of the twentieth century: its failure to address adequately the changing personal and social needs of new social groups, as well as monks and laity in general, who were all searching for innovative forms of religious experience, meaning and identity, and its failure to secure a convincing cultural and institutional monopoly over the social sources and collective expressions of religious charisma. Both of these failures, in turn, underlie the single most prominent development within Thai religiosity since the 1960s: an eruption of alternative conceptions of Buddhist religiosity which contest either implicitly or explicitly the vision, dominance and salience of both establishment state and modernist reform Buddhism. This resurgence can be seen in both the rise of new Buddhist movements and the efflorescence of innovative, alternative forms of popular religiosity – including spirit possession – beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The story of these changes is the subject matter of this chapter.

In this chapter I first describe the social changes produced by industrial capitalism, democratization and urbanization in Thailand after World War II, and then discuss the general religious consequences of these historical transformations. I follow this with a discussion of the rise of new Buddhist movements, the decline and fragmentation of establishment Buddhism, and resulting changing economy of charisma and authority in late-twentieth century Thai Buddhism. I then turn to a closer examination of efflorescence of popular religiosity resulting from these developments. Finally, in light of this multi-faceted historical context, I discuss the historical emergence, expansion and consolidation of professional spirit mediums as a social role and religious identity and I offer up some revisionist interpretations of how their emergence and consolidation was related to other religious actors and the wider social dynamics discussed earlier in the chapter.

### **Industrial Capitalism, Democracy and Urbanization in the Post-World War II Era**

Despite the growing cultural, political, and economic turmoil accompanying the process of nation-building and modernization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the deeper underlying social divisions, structure and bias of the country's social order and political economy, and the ruling elite which dominated it, persisted largely intact up until the mid-twentieth century (Pasuk and Baker 1999: 38-39). This dynamic was true despite the changing internal character and composition of the ruling political elite which controlled the state's increasingly powerful and dominating patrimonial bureaucracy. The absolute monarchy's monopoly over wealth and power in the early twentieth century was built on the material surplus of an expanding peasant economy producing for the market and the subordination of a Chinese merchant class acting as entrepreneurs and intermediaries, while the military and civilian

political elites in control after the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932 successfully retained this same general strategy of political domination. This continuity was also true despite the changing character of economic production and trade in Siam following the decline of the tax-farming system in the late nineteenth century, the emergence of indigenous rice barons and domestic urban entrepreneurs during the economic boom of the 1920s, and the creation of state economic enterprises beginning in the 1930s. Domestic entrepreneurs and local capitalists were stifled under a monarchy which aggrandized wealth to itself and favored foreign firms and international trading houses, and they continued to suffer under the post-1932 military ruling elites who devised schemes to protect peasants from the deprivations of businessmen and created state enterprises in order to put the urban economy under the government's bureaucratic control (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 91-120).

By the middle of the twentieth century, however, far-reaching social changes that would fundamentally transform the structure and dynamics of Thailand's political economy and sociocultural landscape were beginning to emerge. Although these developments in their full richness are multifaceted and exceedingly complicated, for the sake of brevity and clarity I will frame my discussion of them by focusing on three broad types of social change which have in combination significantly remade the face of Thailand in the second half of the twentieth century: expanding industrial capitalist development, deepening political democratization, and intensifying urbanization. In many ways, these wide-ranging transformations within Thailand's economy, politics and society were intimately interrelated, each development dynamically reinforcing and influencing both the shifting trajectory and emerging character of the other two dominant historical developments. The new social forces and cultural dynamics unleashed by these post-World War II developments have thoroughly reshaped the overall cultural and social

landscape of Thailand over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, and not surprisingly, therefore, these transformations have also reverberated resoundingly within the field of contemporary Thai religiosity as well. In response to the demands and promises of a new industrial, democratic and urbanized landscape and world, the symbolic, social and ritual forms of Thai religiosity have been transformed.<sup>125</sup>

*Expanding Industrial Capitalist Development.* After World War II Thailand's official policy of state-led economic nationalism eroded. As the domestic business sector was encouraged, commerce expanded and eventually an import-substitution industrialization policy led to the growth of industry, manufacturing GDP and an industrial labor workforce as the agricultural sector declined. When growth slowed in the 1970s and a deep recession and fiscal crisis in the mid 1980s followed, Thailand pursued a structural realignment of the economy toward export production. What followed was a golden age of high economic growth that lasted until the Asian economic crisis of 1997. As Thailand's industrial structure deepened and diversified in alliance with overseas capital, a secondary boom in domestic urban markets resulted. The export-led economic boom of the 1980s and 1990s transformed and restructured the Thai economy yet again, while simultaneously deepening the dominance of industrial manufacturing within the economy.

Forty years of sustained economic growth based on deepening industrialization, the expansion of capitalist production, and the spreading dominance of the capitalist market in the provision and distribution of goods radically transformed the social landscape of Thailand in a relatively short period of time. The changes resulting from this transformation were especially swift and pronounced during the 1980s and 1990s when Thailand benefited from a rapidly

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<sup>125</sup> For the sake of brevity, the following discussions are streamlined and simplified. Specific statistical data, nuances of historical developments, and complexities of interpretation have been excised. Unless otherwise noted, the primary reference source is Pasuk and Baker 1995.

deepening industrialization and structural diversification of its economy. Many social and cultural trends that still seemed only suggestive or provisional up through the mid-1980s appeared decisive and irreversible by the mid-1990s when the country experienced a general surge of developmental pride, business confidence, and nationalist euphoria over the promise of globalization.

A variety of general social consequences resulted from these economic developments. Economic wealth grew but its distribution worsened whether measured according to class or geography. The gap between rich and poor widened precipitously across the board, but especially during the boom years of the 1980s and 1990s. Thailand's occupational structure expanded and diversified as vast numbers of men and women found themselves leaving the rural countryside and striking out into new industrial, commercial and professional occupations radically different from both their parents' livelihoods and the social worlds of rural agricultural work, status and prestige within which they had grown up. New occupational categories expanded dramatically – craftsmen, production workers and laborers; service, clerical and sales workers; professional and technical workers; administrative, executive and managerial workers. In order to service these new occupations, basic, secondary and higher education rapidly expanded between 1960 and 1990. Students from rural areas and provincial towns moved up through the educational hierarchy and more of these graduates entered the private sector instead of government service after the 1970s. All of these changes transformed the country's class structure. Decades of industrial capitalist development significantly increased the size and diversified the character of both the middle and the working classes, while simultaneously spreading these intensifying class divisions deeper into rural Thai society as well. Finally, the long decades of economic growth and capitalist expansion fostered a generalized consumerist

ethos and orientation which spread beyond the lifestyle expectations of the upper and middle classes and into the wider population that hoped to join them. Values of moderation, deferment and simplicity have been marginalized as the promise and satisfaction of material improvements is celebrated, while businesses produce and the market delivers more and more of the forms of popular culture and entertainment which circulate within both urban and rural communities. Non-commercialized forms of popular culture, while frequently accorded cultural acclaim and social deference, are nonetheless just as frequently sidelined within the daily experience of entertainment and leisure that inundates the average Thai citizen, and especially those living in urban settings.

*Deepening Political Democratization.* The principle of liberal democratic governance was constitutionally enshrined in Thailand's political culture in 1932 when a decade or more of rising opposition to royal absolutism and nationalism resulted in the end of the absolute monarchy. As the following decades witnessed continuing struggles between the bureaucracy and its remnants of administrative nobility, the military faction of the 1932 coup group, and the civilian elements of the same coup group, parliamentary democratic rule suffered, especially in the wake of a rising military nationalism that swept aside those groups that desired a more open political system. Military leaders slowly worked to destroy all opposition to their rule between 1946 and 1959. As they forged powerful political alliances between business interests, the bureaucracy and themselves, they harassed politicians and repeatedly staged military coups until military dictatorship was secured by the beginning of the 1960s. Managed elections returned to the political stage by the late 1960s, but ruptures in the coalition between the bureaucracy, the military, business and a restored royalty that were exacerbated by student protests led to the temporary collapse of military led rule in the 1970s. Although a violent counter-reaction

temporarily restored the fortunes of the old military led coalition, by 1979 parliament and elections were restored. The sharing of power between the military and business started unraveling in the mid-1980s however, culminating in 1988 with the election of a civilian prime minister.

Once democratic elections were restored in 1992 after yet another military coup, Thai political culture witnessed an intensifying concern for a deepening of democratic rule beyond simply free and fair contested elections and governance by a parliamentary coalition of political parties. As the political fortunes of the military fell and business interests in alliance with the bureaucracy rose to a position of dominance, the political prominence of a more broadly based civil society began to emerge to contest that very same dominance. Business interests self-organized in the 1970s and 1980s, but other social groups and economic actors followed suit in the 1980s, often led by a variety of non-governmental organizations. Fueling all of these developments was the growing appeal of a broader conception of democratic participation, accountability and control. The result was the more generalized and wide-spread growth in Thailand during the 1980s and 1990s of an organizationally robust civil society which could hold both the government and businesses answerable for their behavior. By explicitly adopting an ideology of self-defense against predatory behavior of both the state and the market, rural non-governmental organizations – aided by allied efforts among a wider social movement composed of urban intellectuals, activists and the media – directly challenged the accepted assumption of both governmental bureaucracies and business corporations that they could act without having to answer to the more general public, except perhaps during an election cycle. As a result, public protests and media campaigns became a common tool through which oppressed groups tried to exert democratic political pressure, particularly as struggles over dwindling natural resources in

the rural economy intensified and became socially explosive. Avoiding strategies of violent confrontation, this restive civil society made the principles of self-empowerment, collective organizing, local wisdom, and public confrontation a more and more acceptable dimension of Thailand's deepening culture of democratic governance.

*Intensifying Urbanization.* Throughout the post-World War II decades of economic growth, most of the expansion in Thailand's industrial activities, occupational opportunities and educational institutions were concentrated in urban centers throughout the country, but especially in Bangkok which as a classic primate city was the urban environment where these changes were most likely to be spatially located. In this sense, the second half of the twentieth century, and especially the decades from the 1960s on, was a period which witnessed the intensifying urbanization of Thai society and culture. The percentage of the population living in urban areas increased, the rate of urban population growth consistently grew, and more of Thailand's urban population lived in larger urban centers. The result was a much larger urban middle and working class, fueled to a large degree by temporary-turned-permanent migration from impoverished rural regions.

Deepening urbanization produced a variety of social consequences. The spatial organization of economic and social activities was radically transformed. Unplanned and unregulated development led to the inadequate and chaotic delivery of basic infrastructure. Previously integrated and coherent communities were invaded by the material, social and cultural demands of a vibrant commercial urbanism, their autonomy was undermined, and they were subsequently re-knitted into a more diffuse and anonymous sociocultural order based on the logic of the market and the influence of commercial interests. New occupations, new residential communities, new commercial activities and the intense social mobility in and out of these



settings ensured that established and shared social hierarchies and forms of communal interaction, whether based on the rural society left behind or the old urban social order rapidly being replaced, were difficult to maintain, while newer forms of equal resiliency were slow to emerge and crystallize. The highly personalized relations of mutual familiarity, obligation and trust which tended to define traditional rural and urban society and which were formalized through the patronage relations of dyads and entourages was increasingly challenged by the diffuse, anonymous character of urban social relations as well as the unpredictable yet dominating power of state bureaucracies and commercial enterprises, both of which were increasingly difficult to avoid. Although all urban dwellers sought to strategically cultivate such intimate personalized relations of patronage, the character of urban social life frequently rendered the secure dependence they offered either irrelevant in certain key social situations or difficult to foster and maintain in others (Korff 1992: 128-143, Anuchat and Ross 1992: 52-55).

In addition, the urban society and culture which emerged during these years of intense population growth was characterized by greater sociocultural diversity, complexity and conflict than existed within the cultural horizons or backgrounds of either most rural migrants to the city or those residents raised in the less diverse and volatile urban settings of the past. Like all other urban centers<sup>126</sup>, the cities of Thailand – but especially the Bangkok megalopolis – inevitably fostered this diversity, complexity and conflict by perpetually cultivating a multiplicity of distinct subcultures within the urban environment. By attracting migrants from a variety of geographic places and concentrating together in close physical proximity a critical mass of people who share similar interests or a similar identity, urban centers inevitably provide the necessary spatial, social and cultural foundations for the creation of those social networks upon

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<sup>126</sup> Fischer (1984) provides a classic explanation and interpretation of the fundamental social and cultural dynamics that emerge from urbanization and which produce sociocultural diversity, conflict and accommodation in the urban environment.

which subcultures survive. The larger the city, moreover, the more likely it is that these networks will develop the critical mass necessary to achieve organizational and institutional autonomy, social and cultural distinctiveness, and historical self-consciousness (Fischer 1984). Economic specialization and the growth of a politicized civil society helped to ensure that this urbanized social propensity for cultural diversity and subcultures would actually flourish. Moreover, the rapid and intense urbanization of Thailand in the second half of the twentieth century meant that this subcultural variety would be more prominent, more chaotic, and more diverse than was the case within Thai urban settings anytime previously in their history.

As a result of this deepening urbanization, consequently, by the beginning of the 1990s the mythic balance of power in Thailand between the urban and the rural had been reversed. Whereas up through the beginning of the 1980s most Thais continued to see themselves as living in a country of farmers in which rural society set the pace of the country's cultural life, a mere ten years later the dominant contemporary public face and self-understanding of Thais was more often negotiated with regards to the modern life which flourished in urban Thailand. A triumphant, brash, self-confident urban society and culture, forged primarily in Bangkok, ruled the day, dominating the airwaves, television screens and newspapers upon which a national self-consciousness was projected, debated and contested. The dominating economic and political centrality of cities, especially Bangkok, had long been recognized, but the long-decades of sustained urbanization after World War II fostered the hard to ignore fact that urban Thailand was also now socially and culturally dominant as well.

**Generalized Religious Consequences of Expanding Industrial Capitalist Development,  
Deepening Political Democratization, and Intensifying Urbanization**

I argue that one general, aggregate consequence of post-World War II expanding industrial capitalist development, deepening political democratization and intensifying urbanization was a diffuse yet broad-based increase in the social insecurity, uncertainty and instability within the lives of those Thais whose day-to-day existence took place within social environments significantly influenced by these historical trends. The viability of each of these general social processes is dependent on not only the creative destruction and transformation of the established economic, political or social structures of Thai society, but their continued transformation and perpetual rearticulation. Although insecurity, uncertainty and instability certainly were not unknown in the rural and urban worlds of Thailand prior to these historical developments, the scale, depth and pace of these social changes has intensified their experiential salience since World War II.<sup>127</sup>

Capitalist development has fostered social and geographic mobility as more and more Thais pursue new and different occupational trajectories, spend their days involved in new and different regimes of managed skilled labor, move to and live within new and different residential settings, educate themselves within new and different constellations of knowledge and practice, and dream about and pursue new and different goals of material prosperity, social status and cultural prestige. Political democratization has given rise to new hierarchies of social influence and responsibility, new forms of social conflict and their mediation, new constellations and articulations of collective interests, and new values such as individualism, public accountability and grassroots participation. Urbanization has fostered new residential communities, new centers of commerce, new subcultures and lifestyles, and new forms of collective and public interaction.

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<sup>127</sup> In the last two decades it has become quite common among scholars examining the intensifying scale and intensity of religious change in Thailand to highlight the importance of increasing social insecurity, uncertainty and instability in fueling these changes. See, for example, Taylor (1990), Zehner (1990), Brun (1993), Jackson (1999a), Jackson (1999b), Morris (2000), Tanabe (2000a), Pattana (2002), Tanabe (2002), Anan (2003), Johnson (2011), Jackson (2012), Pattana (2012), and Chulong (2013).

In all of these specific ways, therefore, these three historical trends have transformed the cultural values, social relations, intersubjective practices and phenomenological experiences that define large swaths of Thai culture and society.

In addition, capitalist development, political democratization and urbanization as general social processes all increase the dependency of individuals and groups upon the unpredictable vagaries of impersonal institutions, the opaqueness of vague or unknown formal rules, and the seemingly arbitrary decisions of unfamiliar and anonymous, but powerful, strangers. In this sense, the social autonomy of individuals and groups to organize and control their own daily existence is diminished as the fate of persons and collectivities is increasingly bound up with the decisions and actions of a wider constellation of bureaucratic institutions and social strangers that are frequently impervious to any individual's or group's direct or indirect influence or control. The increasing scale and breadth of unpredictability which pervades the social environment under these historical conditions and which fosters a rise in generalized social anomie and alienation, however, also simultaneously intensifies dreams of control over this instability and uncertainty. These dreams are played out through the search for techniques and social relations which can grant such control as well as restore a sense of autonomy. Frequently, religious techniques are an idiom which promises a restoration of control and autonomy, and many new religious movements and phenomenon are portrayed as innovations offering up just this promise to the problem of alienation and anomie.

Those individuals or groups who throw their weight behind these disruptive historical developments are implicitly committing themselves to programs of social action designed to not only induce social change, but to ideally shape and control the directionality and character of these future social changes as well. Yet given the increasing complex, impersonal and collective

nature of these social processes, their growing institutionalization through formal economic, political and social mechanisms, and their subsequent resistance to any simple or direct effort of management and control by any specific set of actors, the hope and promise of social control and autonomy, of bending these broad-based and diffuse social changes so that they meet the needs of any specific individual or collective interests, will always be thwarted ultimately. Faced with increasing insecurity, uncertainty, and instability, with deepening dependency and less autonomy, with growing alienation and anomie, individuals and groups caught within these historical trends struggle to achieve some degree of control over and choice in the direction of their personal and collective fate.<sup>128</sup>

Given the fact that Theravada Buddhism, like other religious traditions, has typically functioned in part as a prominent repository of various thaumaturgic beliefs and practices designed to provide control over generalized social insecurity and uncertainty, it is not surprising that Thai religiosity has actually flourished within a social environment characterized by capitalist development, political democratization and urbanization. Numerous scholars of Thai religion have noted, although sometimes only in passing, that those religious beliefs and practices which function to provide individuals with an increased sense of protection, control and success in the face of a hostile and unpredictable environment have thrived and even diversified during the final decades of the twentieth century (Irvine 1984, Mulder 1990: 39-40, Brun 1993: 16, Anan 2000, Jackson 1999a, 1999b).<sup>129</sup> Whether glossed as Buddhist, Brahmanical or animist in character, religious beliefs and practices associated with divination and prophecy,

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<sup>128</sup> The academic literature on the rise of new Thai religious movements has frequently framed its analysis in these broad terms. On new Buddhist movements, see Jackson (1989), Suwana (1990), Taylor (1990), Zehner (1990), Apinya (1993), Keyes (1993), Swearer (1994) and Keyes (1999a). On new “cultic” religious movements see Yagi (1988), Nithi (1993), Nithi (1994), Jackson (1999a), Jackson (1999b), and Stengs (2009).

<sup>129</sup> A similar perspective more generally is evident in analyses by scholars of Theravada Buddhism across modern South and Southeast Asia. See, for instance, Obeyesekere (1967) on Sri Lanka and Spiro (1967) on Burma.

supramundane protection and healing, or spiritual blessings and auspiciousness have flourished as Thais increasingly seek to both avoid threatening risks and dangers and ensure future success and well-being in an anxiety producing, unpredictable economic, political and social environment.<sup>130</sup> The rising popularity, and cost, of Buddhist amulets, sacralized statues, and magical charms, as well as the pronounced appeal of devotional activities organized around and focused upon charismatic religious virtuosos, during the last decades of the twentieth century attests to the animated pursuit by Thais of thaumaturgic intervention and supramundane protection within a social environment perceived as chaotic and dangerous.<sup>131</sup>

At a less abstract, yet still general level of analysis, the expanding industrial capitalist development, deepening political democratization and intensifying urbanization which have transformed Thai society and culture during the post-World War II period have each impinged in their own particular manner on the field of Thai religiosity. In many ways, the religious changes produced by these developments have generally paralleled a range of similar specific changes found within other domains of Thai social life such as the economy and politics. Moreover, the particular material, social and ideological changes associated with each of these general social processes has had a transformative impact upon not only Thai Buddhism in general but the

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<sup>130</sup> These analyses of the efflorescence of the thaumaturgic in contemporary Thailand parallel, although rarely directly engage, a more general anthropological literature concerning the efflorescence of magic more generally and sorcery and witchcraft more specifically, in response to modernity. More recently in the wake of the past two decades and the global dominance and celebration of neo-liberal capitalism, numerous scholars have more specifically focused on this efflorescence as a response to the new economic inequalities and social turbulence produced by the amorality of expanding market economies. See, for instance, Fisiy and Geschiere (1991), Comaroff and Comaroff (1993), Weller (1994), and Comaroff and Comaroff (1999). From my perspective on Thai history, however, the contemporary sources of generalized sociocultural instability and insecurity giving rise to this efflorescence are broader and more diverse than simply the neo-liberal capitalist challenges of the current moment.

<sup>131</sup> Tambiah (1984) analyzes a classic example of this general social phenomenon in his work on the rapidly rising fame of northeastern ascetic meditation monks during the 1970s and 1980s, especially among Bangkokians and the nation's social, economic and political elites. A widespread cult of Buddhist amulets, affiliated in many ways with these forest meditation masters and fueled by rising violence, also flourished at the same time (Chalong 2013). I describe more contemporary manifestations of this same dynamic centered on devotionalism, religious charisma and supramundane potency, including several novel manifestations new to the Thai scene, later in this chapter when I discuss the recent efflorescence of Thai popular religiosity in the 1980s and 1990s.

appeal and reach of each of the regimes of religion making and religious value I have previously outlined: inclusive syncretic, modernist reform and establishment state Buddhism.

Thus, the general increase in economic wealth resulting from industrial capitalist development, regardless of its grossly unequal distribution, has financed a generalized expansion and increase in material support for religious institutions, virtuosos and specialists of all sorts. The increased construction of religious buildings and creation of devotional statues, along with the vast sums of money that flow into the bank accounts of the country's most charismatic monks and most famous temples, is evidence of the impressive amounts of monetary resources that are currently directed at religious – but particularly Buddhist – institutions, actors and goals.<sup>132</sup> Less orthodox religious practitioners and practices – such as spirit mediums, dissident and alternative Buddhist organizations, and even the highly stigmatized purveyors of “superstitious” and “magical” spells and mantras – have also materially benefited from the increased amount of disposable wealth possessed by a broader segment of the general population.<sup>133</sup> In addition, however, the disproportionate amount of this increased wealth which is available to those new middle-class social groups that are most likely to find establishment Buddhism unsatisfying means that this new wealth can also be used by private individuals to financially support new and alternative Buddhist movements and organizations which would

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<sup>132</sup> Jackson (1999a) examines in detail the appeal of one of the most charismatic Buddhist monks of the 1990s, Luang Phau Khoo, whose blessings were sought after by politicians and businessmen, civilians and soldiers, men and women, and whose monastery, as a result, was estimated to sell about one hundred thousand baht worth of blessed amulets every weekday and a million baht worth on the weekends.

<sup>133</sup> In December of 1995, the Research Center of the Thai Farmers Bank estimated that no less than 20 billion baht (or roughly US\$800 million) annually circulated within the informal economy involving spirit mediums and their services. The accuracy of this estimate is questionable, based as it is on several dubious assumptions the center makes in estimating the number of spirit mediums in Thailand (supposedly roughly 100,000 with an average of 1.5 in each village across Thailand), the average amount spent by a client when visiting a medium (about 60 baht), and the average number of clients who seek services from each of these mediums on each day (approximately 10). Although the precise amount may be off, the mere fact that a bank would presume it worthwhile to analyze the economic wealth circulating among spirit mediums in any given year indicates that it likely is not negligible, even if it is not 20 billion baht. To the best of my knowledge, there is no solid aggregate data concerning the economics of contemporary Thai spirit mediums, professional or otherwise. See Thai Farmers Bank Research Center 1995.

otherwise only receive a limited amount of financial assistance from either the state or local communities. In this sense then, capitalist growth has provided the economic resources necessary to support the growing organizational diversity and ideological pluralism currently found with contemporary Thai Buddhism.

Capitalist development has also facilitated subtle ideological changes within Thai Buddhist religiosity. As a result of the rising prominence of materialism and consumerism within Thai culture, the character of worldly satisfaction, security and success which most devout Buddhist laity pursue, in part, through their religious practice is increasingly defined in terms of an economic idiom of obtaining monetary wealth, achieving financial security, and gaining social recognition via the public display of their wealth. In addition, the values and rhetoric associated with success in the capitalist market – financial profit, individual prosperity, the efficient delivery of services, competitive achievement – are also now used to describe successful Buddhist institutions and practitioners or to criticize those temples and monks seen as backwards and inferior. Moreover, some of the most socially popular and financially successful Buddhist temples and their monastic guardians now organize the performance of religious rituals and the delivery of spiritual services on a model of market exchange, even as they have simultaneously commodified a wide range of religious goods and services that can now only be obtained from them through monetary transactions.<sup>134</sup> All of these ideological developments, in turn, have created a sharp counter-response by critics who charge that this “Buddhist commerce”

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<sup>134</sup> The most dramatic and extreme example of this trend is Wat Sanam Chand in Chachoengsao Province just east of Bangkok which opened a “holy water supermarket” in the monastery grounds that offered about 200 brands of bottled holy water based on the formulas of famous monks from all over Thailand. As with many other sacralized items with thaumaturgic powers, the holy water could provide a range of auspicious blessings ranging from improved business profits to the healing of disease and the overcoming of marital infidelity.



is destroying the moral sensibility of Thai Buddhism and inverting its fundamental ethical values and social purpose.<sup>135</sup>

Deepening political democratization has also left its mark on contemporary Thai religiosity. Socially, the growth and multiplication of intermediate non-state organizations and movements which supports the rise of political civil society in general has its parallels within the domain of Thai Buddhist religiosity. The institutional and organizational dominance exerted by state-controlled establishment Buddhism during the early decades of the twentieth century has been much less pronounced since the 1960s as new and alternative Buddhism movements and organizations have developed and flourished. Many of these groups are only loosely subject to hierarchical control by the state, while a few others have actively sought to either distance themselves from the official state Sangha or explicitly deny the institutional and even legal authority of the state, and the state-controlled Buddhist hierarchy, to regulate and control their behavior.<sup>136</sup> Moreover, the increased financial wealth now circulating outside of the direct control of the state and those bureaucratic and economic elites most closely affiliated with it means that these diverse movements, organizations and associations outside, or on the periphery, of the Thai state's religious bureaucracy have a greater relative degree of social and institutional autonomy than was previously the case with non-conforming religious movements in earlier historical eras.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> A good example of this critique of Buddhist commerce and consumerism can be found in Visalo (1999: 241-243, 250-251). Jackson (1999c) analyzes this critical discourse in the context of the post-1997 Thai economic crisis and public debates over Buddhist authenticity and the dangers of "supernaturalism" and "superstition." Pattana (2008) explores in more detail the debates over "Buddhist commerce" in Thailand at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

<sup>136</sup> This development is explored in more detail later in this chapter.

<sup>137</sup> Jackson (1997) foreshadows how the growth of civil society has transformed the religious landscape in contemporary Thailand. However, scholars of Thai religion generally have not analyzed the growth of new Buddhist and "cultic" movements within the analytic frame of debates over the growth of civil society and the deepening of democratization.

Finally, the various social developments associated with intensifying urbanization have also reverberated within the field of Thai Buddhist religiosity. Most fundamentally, the emergence and proliferation of subcultural diversity and plurality associated with intensifying urbanization in general has also characterized the field of Thai religiosity as well during the last several decades. Nourished by the relative anonymity of urban life and the dense concentration of people with similar interests and similar social identities, a wide diversity of religious beliefs, practices, and experiences that would have had only a marginal social presence in non-urban settings have, instead, managed to more easily coalesce, crystallize and develop as distinct collective phenomenon within the ramified and cross-cutting social networks that make up urban life. The demands of urban life have also, in some circumstances, both facilitated and pressured these religious collectivities to become more organizationally discrete, socially bounded and culturally distinct in a manner that likewise would have been less necessary, and less likely, in non-urbanized settings.

As a result, the sociocultural landscape of mainstream Thai Buddhist religiosity since the 1960s has witnessed a bubbling efflorescence of religious diversity and innovation, with some individuals, groups, movements, beliefs and practices rising into popular prominence only to subsequently fade away, while others achieve an organizational coherence and institutional presence that has allowed them to persist for much longer periods of time.<sup>138</sup> Thus, for example, various charismatic monks, spirit mediums and other religious specialists have over the years managed to organize around themselves sizeable entourages, extended social networks, and even large-scale formal organizations through which to pursue their unique visions of moral virtue,

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<sup>138</sup> Jackson (1999b: 251-254) explicitly comments on the relatively undocumented social diversity of popular religiosity in Thailand, as well as the need to explore and explain the larger patterns underlying the persistent waves of religious populism and the process by which some devotional movements rise to positions of greater prominence and persistence. He sees the power of a sensationalist media as crucial to the facilitation and intensification of the charismatic power and mass appeal of many specific movements.

spiritual practice and ethical action, projects which do not always coincide with the visions of either modernist reform, establishment state or inclusive syncretic Buddhism. Likewise, within urban Thailand there has also emerged less organizationally discrete ‘cultic’ movements which are centered on particular figures within the expanding cosmological pantheon of Thai religiosity but which have no particular individual or group that can be identified as either the leader or progenitor of the innovative, religious sensibilities which animates these movements.<sup>139</sup>

These various urban religious groups, organizations, movements, and subcultures each stake out their own distinct position within the diversifying ecology of Thai religious beliefs, practices and experiences, and each similarly occupies a unique position of relative conformity and disagreement with the three regimes of religious value and legitimacy I have discussed. In this sense, as they each strive to find and maintain their own particular voice within the urban cacophony of religious plurality, these various groups, organizations, movements and subcultures are constantly engaged in more or less subtle negotiations of identification and distinction, alliance and autonomy with modernist reform, establishment state and inclusive syncretic Buddhism as structures of value, legitimacy and definition. Often however establishment state Buddhism is the most prominent foci of concern because its ideologies and actors are not only the most institutionally coherent and organized, but also the most socially prominent in their reach across and into the religious landscape. Thus, a prominent consequence of this ramifying religious plurality and diversity has been to fundamentally contest that vision of centralization and homogenization which has animated the social project of establishment Buddhism since the beginning of the twentieth century. In the process, the character and content

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<sup>139</sup> The most famous of these types of religious movements in the 1990s was the devotional movements centered around the deceased King Chulalongkorn and the bodhisattva Kuan Im. I discuss these briefly at the end of this chapter when I examine the diversity of beliefs and practices within the efflorescence of popular religiosity which occurred in the 1980s and 1990s.

of what could be called mainstream Buddhism has also become more plural, contested and ambiguous as well.

In addition, the proliferation of new intermediate forms of collective ritual life and devotional community which simultaneously stand alongside and between the state-dominated ecclesiastical bureaucratic authorities and local Buddhist temples has created constellations of secondary association, socialization and identification which supplement more traditional and territorially bounded loci of religious solidarity. Many of these new urban-based groups, organizations, movements and subcultures provide novel forms of social membership, personalized patronage and collective identity that supplement or replace the more established foci and structures of religious belonging, such as neighborhood temples, previously found within Thailand's social ecology of religiosity. In this sense, these new forms of urban religiosity directly address in a religious idiom the generalized social anomie and alienation accompanying urbanization, as well as the more particular cravings for charismatic authority, benevolent patronage, and supramundane intercession that many Thai Buddhist laypersons seek to satisfy through their participation in everyday religious rituals and practice.

The general historical consequence of all these various specific economic, political and social changes within the field of Thai religiosity over the last several decades has been the decreasing hegemonic dominance of establishment Thai Buddhism in particular and the increasing prominence and autonomy of emergent, alternative beliefs, practices, experiences, organizations and authorities. And it is this larger historical trend which frames at the most general level the recent emergence and increasing social prominence of professional Thai spirit mediums and spirit possession within contemporary Thai society and culture. By examining the particular historical dynamics of the decline and fragmentation of establishment Buddhism and

the simultaneous efflorescence and mainstream acceptance of innovative forms of popular religiosity, therefore, will we be able to fully grasp the personal motivations, social dynamics and cultural logics which define the beliefs and practices of those individuals and groups who belong to the subculture of Bangkok professional Thai spirit mediums.

### **The Rise of New Buddhist Movements and the Decline and Fragmentation of Establishment Buddhism**

Numerous scholars of contemporary Thai Buddhism have recognized the declining moral, ideological and institutional authority of establishment Buddhism during the closing decades of the twentieth century (Keyes 1999a, 1999b; Jackson 1997, 1999a, 1999b; Swearer 1999). Although its public legitimacy and cultural dominance has persisted, establishment Buddhism's social and personal appeal among large segments of the Thai Buddhist population has decreased for a variety of reasons. Its rituals and ceremonies are perceived increasingly as less and less relevant to many of the most pressing personal needs and aspirations of both rural peasants and urban professionals. Its administrative framework is seen as ossified and inadequate to the demands of a fast-paced, rapidly changing social world. Its vision of social ethics is perceived as unjust, irrelevant or backwards. Its models of religious action for monks and laypersons alike are seen as narrow, tradition-bound and stultifying. Originally a source of great intellectual creativity and social ferment, establishment Buddhism is perceived increasingly by many critics as the central obstacle to those changes necessary to make Buddhism more relevant and meaningful in contemporary Thailand.

As Swearer notes, "the impulse for religious revitalization and reform subsequent to the initiatives by Mongkut and Wajiriyana has come in part, but not exclusively, from monks outside

of the modern Thai civil religion that they created” (Swearer 1999: 216). This gradual decline in the appeal of establishment Buddhism and the emergence of revitalizing trends outside the official Sangha hierarchy and organization, in fact, is a direct consequence of the growing demand for new forms of religious practice, meaning, experience and participation by both monks and laypersons, but especially the latter. As Pasuk and Baker succinctly explain:

For many in Thailand’s new urban society, this form of Buddhism [state-controlled establishment Buddhism] became inadequate. It excluded the layman from any involvement beyond merit-making acts and short stays in the *wat*. It denied the possibility of ethical self-improvement and social elevation. It underwrote traditional hierarchies and authoritarian regimes. It was profoundly unsatisfying for those who believed in education, self-improvement, enrichment and participation (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 376).

By the late 1960s a wide range of Buddhist thinkers and social movements began to publicly emerge on the periphery of not only establishment Buddhism but mainstream popular Buddhism as well. Over time these movements cultivated innovative forms of Buddhist practice, meaning, and experience which spoke more directly and satisfyingly to the intellectual, social and personal needs of those segments of the largely educated, urban middle class residing in both Bangkok and large provincial cities who comprised the majority of these movements’ membership. These movements and their leaders have challenged, explicitly and implicitly, establishment Buddhism’s vision of the relationship between the modern state and Buddhism, the role of the Sangha in contemporary Thai society, the normative role of the monk and layperson, and what constitutes a proper understanding of the doctrinal teachings of the Theravada tradition. The continuing growth of these movements is both a sign of the declining appeal and hegemonic dominance of establishment Buddhism and a further cause of its weakening ability to authoritatively define and control the normative forms of late-twentieth-century Thai Buddhist religiosity among mainstream practitioners.

Drawing on the financial support of faithful lay supporters and control over media resources which allow them to propagate their own distinctive messages, these movements have prospered in the more organizationally diverse social environment which has emerged as civil society has grown and flourished in contemporary Thailand in general, but especially its urbanized regions. As Jackson notes: “Since the 1960s, and paralleling the country’s rapid socio-economic growth, a virtual market-place of competing Buddhist movements has developed in Bangkok outside the formal structure of state-*sangha* relations” (Jackson 1989: 116). All of these religious movements began relatively independent of establishment Buddhism, and all of them eventually reached various forms of accommodation with the Sangha’s formal ecclesiastical hierarchy and the civil bureaucracy affiliated with it. Thus, for example, Thammakai’s evangelical and consumerism-friendly effort to revitalize Buddhism as a civil religion was not intimately interwoven into the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Mahanikai order until only recently, while Buddhadasa’s call for a socially engaged Buddhism grounded in a renewed rational and ethical vision of *nibana* has been, for the most part, benignly neglected by ecclesiastical and civil authorities since its beginning. At the same time, an ecological Buddhism grounded in the Thammayut-affiliated tradition of forest meditation and monasticism has suffered both cooption and suppression at the hands of civil and ecclesiastical authorities, while Santi Asoke’s rigorously ascetic vision of a utopian agrarian Buddhism free from the control and deprivations of both the modern state and the capitalist market has long been subject to both hostile marginalization and legal persecution by the Sangha and the Thai state.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Beginning in the mid-1980s, scholars of Thai Buddhism began to produce a large number of wide-ranging analyses of these new Buddhist movements. Some were explicitly comparative (Jackson 1989, Suwanna 1990, Taylor 1990, Swearer 1991, Apinya 1993, Keyes 1993, Keyes 1999b). Others focused on a particular movement such as Thammakai (Zehner 1990, Scott 2009), Buddhadasa (Suchira 1992, Swearer 1996, Ito 2012), ecology and forest monks (Taylor 1991, 1993a, 1993b, Kamala 1997, Darlington 2012), or Santi Asoke (Heikkila-Horn 1997, Suwida 2004, Kanoksak 2005).

More historically significant than the specific ideological, social or institutional challenges posed by any of these individual movements, however, is the fact that their cumulative emergence and persistence as organizationally distinct Buddhist collectivities since the 1980s is an indication of the definitive shift towards pluralism emerging within late-twentieth-century Thai Buddhism. This pluralism is multifaceted, ranging from the theological and the ideological, to the institutional and the social. In this sense, the proliferation of a diverse range of undeniably Buddhist movements which continue to publicly exist in a contentious relationship with and alongside establishment Buddhism reveals that the Thai Sangha is, when compared with earlier decades, visibly and undeniably fragmented, a further indication that the hegemonic moral and social authority of establishment Buddhism is also in decline as well (Keyes 1999b: 18-37). As Keyes cogently argues: “Moral authority is increasingly validated neither by the established church nor the state, but by public opinion. What has proven to be in decline is not the sangha as an ideal, but a unified sangha as an institution under a central system of ecclesiastical and political authority as established by law early in the [twentieth] century” (Keyes 1999a: 141).

Central to the oppositional claims of these alternative, non-establishment Buddhist movements is their assertion that they possess a competing yet equally authentic Buddhist charismatic authority (Keyes 1999b: 36). Depending on the movement, this charismatic authority is perceived as vested in either the virtuous personality of a movement’s spiritual leader(s) and administrative elites, the unique communal rituals, social practices and spiritual techniques fashioned by these movements and made available to the general public at large, or the unusual sources of sacral potency accessed and mediated by these leaders and ritual technologies. Regardless of its foundation, however, this multi-faceted pluralism within contemporary Thai



Buddhism reveals not only that the institutional organization, ritual practices and doctrinal teachings of state-controlled, establishment Buddhism have increasingly lost any taken-for-granted claim to ideological or institutional hegemonic dominance in late-twentieth-century Thai Buddhist religiosity, but that establishment Buddhism has also lost its monopoly over the sources and definition of Buddhist charisma. In Keyes opinion, this questioning of whether a state-dominated Sangha could exert a monopoly on Buddhist charisma began to seriously emerge first among the middle class between 1957 and 1973, the era of despotic paternalism when the authoritarian state bureaucracy asserted its political control over the Sangha too overtly (Keyes 1999b: 11). But this questioning only matured ideologically and institutionally when Thai political and bureaucratic elites in the late 1970s reacted against the rise of militant Buddhism, which had emerged earlier during the highly polarized years of tumultuous parliamentary democracy between 1973 and 1976. These political elites, according to Keyes, decided to relax a policy of repressive state control over Buddhism, allowing in the process Thai citizens to begin to legitimately hold and publicly express competing ideas about the proper relationship between state, society and Buddhist religiosity (Keyes 1999b: 12-18).

The increasing number of high-profile religious scandals involving (in)famous monks that continually seized the Thai public's attention during the 1980s and 1990s reflected this efflorescence of a Buddhist *barami* which could no longer be comprehensively defined or effectively regulated solely by ecclesiastical and state authorities, but was instead now authorized and legitimated in a competitive manner by the general public as well. Some of these (in)famous monks were the leaders of these new alternative Buddhist movements, such as Santi Asoke's Phra Photirak, the oppositional ecological conservation monk Phra Prachak, and Thammakai's Phra Dhammachayo. Others were popular, charismatic monks who had developed

a more localized following of loyal lay and monastic supporters either within a particular region or within more expansive and nationalized social networks, such as Phra Nikorn and Phra Yantra. All of these monks, however, were renunciants whose followers perceived them to embody and exemplify a transcendent and virtuous Buddhist charisma, or *bun barami*, but whose claim to moral authority and religious legitimacy were, for numerous different reasons, challenged by the establishment Sangha and affiliated state bureaucratic authorities.

Most of these monastic scandals developed into long, drawn-out controversies widely covered by the popular print and electronic media, and in each case the monk under attack, and his followers and supporters, publicly challenged the Sangha's right to decide who was a properly virtuous monk. And even after the Sangha officially ruled against these monks to one extent or another, significant numbers of people continued to support these now infamous monks and valorize their charismatic authority and power. As Keyes correctly concludes, this persistent wave of scandals is evidence of the contemporary ambiguities and uncertainties facing any effort to definitively recognize, identify and validate true and authentic religious charisma and moral authority among Buddhist monks, or to monopolistically contain this charisma and authority solely within the administrative bounds of the official, established Thai Sangha and the ideological framework of establishment Buddhism (Keyes 1999a; 1999b: 37). What constitutes authentic *barami*, who has the authority to make these judgments, and how to adjudicate between the competing criteria and evaluations advanced by different individuals, groups and institutions, consequently, is an unresolved – but fundamental – dilemma of Buddhist religious authority and legitimacy in contemporary Thailand.

This dilemma of authority and legitimacy, however, complicates the lives of more than just the Sangha and Buddhist monks. The institutional and ideological uncaging of *barami*,

moral authority, charismatic authenticity and religious legitimacy from the hegemonic control and discipline of establishment state Buddhism and its dispersal across a range of popular alternative monastic movements is only part of the narrative of intensifying religious diversity and pluralism within contemporary Thai religiosity. Increasingly, religious charisma and moral authority is being publicly recognized by devout Thai Buddhist practitioners as residing within spiritual virtuosos other than Buddhist monks, establishment or otherwise, and not infrequently these non-monastic religious specialists and virtuosos are conceptualized via the explicitly Buddhist terminology of *barami*. Thus, “some [Thais] have turned away from the sangha altogether to look for charismatic authority in spirit mediums or even pop music performers. The yellow robes are no longer taken by many in Thailand as the unequivocal sign of a person possessing *barami* and the sangha no longer serves for many as the unquestioned moral gyroscope for their society” (Keyes 1999a: 141). What has emerged, in fact, is a newly expanded and ramified religious economy of charismatic authenticity, moral authority and – by implication – supramundane efficacy and mediation in late-twentieth-century Thai Buddhist religiosity. And within this newly intensified and diversified economy of charisma, virtue and supramundane power, spirit mediums – and the very idea of spirit possession – took on a more charged and powerful social, ritual and public presence than had previously been the case in earlier historical eras.

### **The Changing Economy of Charisma, Morality and *Barami* in Late-Twentieth-Century Thai Buddhist Religiosity**

In his reflections on the contemporary Thai public’s search for charismatic moral authority outside of the official Sangha, Keyes seems to imply that this quest is a particularly

new phenomenon. I argue, however, that this claim is not self-evidently the case. Thailand has long been home to religious specialists and virtuosos who are not Buddhist monks, and their moral authority, charismatic authenticity and ritual efficacy as mediators of supramundane powers was recognized and accepted by both monks and laity alike. This recognition and acceptance, however, was contingent upon their cosmological, moral, ritual and social subordination to the transcendent virtue and power of the Buddha's teachings. The religious regimes of modernist reform Buddhism and establishment state Buddhism, however, either denied or diminished the religious authority, authenticity and efficacy of these non-monastic actors.

Even during the heyday of twentieth-century establishment state Buddhism, however, these non-monastic religious specialists and virtuosos never disappeared. What did change under the combined influence of a modernist reform vision and an ideologically and institutionally dominant establishment Buddhism was that now these non-monastic religious specialists and virtuosos were officially labeled as either heterodox, magical, superstitious, amoral and/or non-Buddhist or as local, folk and backwards. Stripped of their public ideological legitimacy by both the modernizing state's civilizing ecclesiastical elites and the reformist's critical skepticism, these religious actors consequently had to socially and culturally adapt in order to preserve, to whatever degree it was possible, their relative religious status, prestige and authority now that they were identified with an officially trivialized or publicly stigmatized field of beliefs and practices. Thus, on the one hand those who could claim an elite status and legitimate identity outside of Buddhism proper, such as Hindu Brahmins affiliated with court rituals and active within Bangkok's royal and elite social circles, could maintain their religious identity, public presence and social status relatively unhindered. On the other hand, less prestigious religious

specialists and virtuosos, such as for example spirit mediums, divination experts and the producers of love potions, responded by simultaneously buttressing their Buddhist credentials, seeking out elite patrons for protection, taking on as circumscribed a public presence as possible, and avoiding whenever possible the possibility of public conflict or controversy with either the ecclesiastical and civil authorities on the one hand or moralizing reformist critics on the other.

In sum, the rise to hegemonic influence and selective dominance of the visions of establishment state and modernist reform Buddhism had two primary consequences for non-monastic religious specialists and virtuosos. Firstly, they experienced a sharp loss of religious legitimacy, status and appeal among that influential minority of monks and laypersons – primarily drawn from the educated, the urban and the elite segments of the population – who were persuaded by and willing to publicly support the agendas of either ecclesiastical authorities or moralizing reformists. Secondly, given the rise of new visions of authentic Buddhism their authority and legitimacy as properly Buddhist agents was suspect. Thus, their moral authority, charismatic authenticity and supramundane efficacy was, for the most part, also rendered generally suspect, if not explicitly impossible, by those influential social groups and institutions that dominated the social landscape of the modernizing nation-state.<sup>141</sup> Any moral authority, social charisma or pragmatic value they were recognized publicly and officially as possessing, therefore, could not be interpreted in terms of a discourse of Buddhism or even true (i.e. modern) religiosity. Instead, their morality, charisma and value could only be interpreted as a

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<sup>141</sup> I qualify with “for the most part” in order to recognize that none of these institutions or social groups were of one opinion on these matters. For instance, the sectarian division between the Mahanikai and the Thammayut orders within the official, state-controlled Sangha meant that, given their differing propensities to critique syncretic beliefs and practices, there was no easy sense in which all members of the Sangha acted with one mind with regard to non-monastic religious specialists and virtuosos, even if the policy-making upper levels of the ecclesiastical hierarchy were dominated by the Thammayut. I presume that an equally complicated plurality of perspectives and interests, in principle and in practice, also defined other state institutions or social groups with regards to their orientations toward and interactions with non-monastic religious specialists and virtuosos. Unfortunately, little historical research exists to allow one to carefully delineate these differences of perspective and interest, much less their practical consequences in specific historical situations and contexts.

manifestation of animism, Hinduism, magic and superstition, or a traditional and backwards worldview.

Neither of these developments, however, meant that the vast majority of the Thai population as a whole generally stopped searching for or publicly recognizing the relative moral authority and religious charisma of non-monastic religious specialists and virtuosos as Keyes seems to imply. Rather, although the religious visions of modernist reform and establishment state Buddhism displayed rising influence since the late nineteenth century, a polytropic, inclusive religious vision nonetheless continued to define the perspective of large segments, no doubt a majority, of the Thai population. What had changed for non-monastic religious specialists and virtuosos was that, generally speaking, in situations in which they had to interact with the dominant social elites and state institutions that governed the official collective life of the modernizing Siamese nation-state, it was much less publicly acceptable or persuasive for them to claim that their beliefs and practices had a patina of normative Buddhist legitimacy to them.

As a result, the ideological and institutional decline in late-twentieth-century Thailand of the ability of both establishment state and modernist reform Buddhism to determinatively shape mainstream Thai Buddhist religiosity significantly influenced non-monastic religious specialist and virtuosos in two ways. First, it became more culturally acceptable and socially viable for these individuals to publicly claim mainstream Buddhist legitimacy for the moral authority and charismatic authenticity which they were invested with by their clients and followers. Second, in a novel development, as the general public also increasingly perceived *barami* as legitimately residing outside the established Sangha in non-conformist Buddhist monks and religious movements, it also became easier and more common for the moral authority, charismatic

authenticity and supramundane efficacy of non-monastic religious specialists and virtuosos – like spirit mediums – to be identified as a product of *barami* as well. Thus, spirit mediums could publicly claim that they possessed *barami* and significant segments of the Thai Buddhist public now agreed with and validated these claims, or at least did not seriously contest them, despite the intermittent counter-claims of reformist monks and establishment religious authorities who denied this possibility.

Although in previous decades a few idiosyncratic non-monastic religious virtuosos had made the assertion that they embodied *barami* despite never having subjected themselves to the discipline of the Sangha and a renunciatory monastic lifestyle (Keyes 1999b: 17),<sup>142</sup> what was apparently new in the 1980s and 1990s was that this claim to the authority and legitimacy of *barami* became both more common and more acceptable across the Thai religious landscape. And in large part, this new development arose because the relative power of elite ecclesiastical and civil authorities to authoritatively recognize and validate religious legitimacy, Buddhist and otherwise, was declining even as the mass Thai public's willingness and capacity to advance contrasting claims of authority and legitimacy was increasing.

This shifting balance in the social foundations of public religious legitimacy was, in turn, instrumental to that efflorescence of charismatic popular religiosity characterized by idioms of devotionism, esotericism and ecstatic behavior which flourished outside of both the institutional boundaries of the formal Sangha and the ideological boundaries of establishment state and modernist reform Buddhism during the 1980s and 1990s. And it is only by carefully examining the specific institutional imperatives, social origins and cultural contours of those changes that swept through mainstream popular Thai religiosity during the final decades of the

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<sup>142</sup> One of these claims was advanced by the very popular spirit medium who founded the Hupphasawaan movement during the 1960s. See Jackson 1988.

twentieth century that one can adequately understand finally the rising prestige and appeal of spirit possession and professional spirit mediums during this same time period. A diffuse, widespread and pervasive flowering of devotionism, esotericism and ecstatic practices within personality-based religious cults and entourages that reworked the cosmologies, hierarchies and technologies of Thai religiosity served as the foundational social and cultural environment within which professional spirit mediumship could flourish throughout Thailand, but especially within large urban settings.

### **Post-Reform and Post-Establishment Theravada Buddhist Diversity and the Efflorescence of Popular Religiosity in Late-Twentieth-Century Thailand**

As Jackson (1999a: 49) perceptively observes, “Religiosity in Thailand is no longer ‘modern’ in the sense of following a path of doctrinal rationalization accompanied by organizational centralization and bureaucratization. In the 1990s Thai religion has become increasingly post-modern, characterized by a resurgence of supernaturalism and an efflorescence of religious expression at the margins of state control, involving a decentralization and localization of religious authority.”<sup>143</sup> As the prestige, centrality and contested dominance of establishment state and modernist reform Buddhism decline, alternative non-establishment conceptualizations of Buddhist religiosity flourished among the general populace, including monks, non-monastic religious specialists and the laity. By the mid-1980s neither centralized state power nor elite ecclesiastical authority was as influential, coercive or dominant as they had

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<sup>143</sup> Unlike Jackson, I would not characterize Thai religion as “post-modern.” In addition, I do not believe that the efflorescence is “a resurgence of supernaturalism.” This language seems to suggest the forceful return of past forms of religiosity that were repressed, and that those are best understood as symptoms of supernaturalism. The efflorescence however contains many new forms of religiosity not previously observed on the religious landscape, and much of it is distinctly “Buddhist” in flavor, although at variance with the religious visions of both modernist reform and establishment state Buddhism.



been in previous decades. Previously, Thai governments of all ideological dispositions had worked hard to link the Sangha, and Buddhism more generally, to larger political-economic projects such as, initially, nation-building and, subsequently, capitalist economic development. Governments had also sought to suppress non-establishment forms of religiosity that were perceived to challenge either state-controlled Buddhism or those larger political projects of nation-building and capitalist development it supported. By the mid-1980s, however, all of these religious-cum-political projects in the name of modernization became both institutionally more difficult and pragmatically less compelling for both state and ecclesiastical authorities.

At the most fundamental level, this reversal was structural in several senses (Jackson 1997). First, by the mid-1980s the Thai state was no longer the undisputed dominant institutional force defining, guiding and actively shaping the material, ideological and organizational shape of Thai society and culture as had previously been the case during the long decades of nation-building and early authoritarian capitalist development. Rather, it now had to compete with other equally, or even more, persuasive and prestigious voices regarding the proper definition and understanding of Thailand's cultural heritage, including Buddhism. Second, many of these alternative voices were deeply critical of the habitual authoritarian stance of the state and the deadening hand of its bureaucratic control. Especially in the political and cultural environment of the late 1980s and early 1990s which celebrated liberal values such as freedom, openness, tolerance, decentralization and the vitality of non-state actors, a program of state-guided centralization and homogenization seemed dangerously outdated. Third, by the mid-1980s the Thai state's political legitimacy was dependent more and more upon delivering economic growth and material prosperity to the general population while simultaneously strengthening and deepening the reality of democratic rule by its citizens. Its traditional legitimizing role as

protector and benefactor of Buddhism and the Sangha, therefore, was increasingly less central to its political legitimacy in the eyes of both the general population and the state itself.

In addition, however, ecclesiastical authorities, state bureaucrats and politicians were less able or interested in trying to flex whatever institutional influence the state still retained when it came to matters of Buddhism and religiosity. The authority of the official Sangha and establishment Buddhism as a whole, for example, was severely undermined by a successive wave of highly publicized scandals involving sex, fraud and corruption (Keyes 1999a). Roundly criticized for its inaction on, and even complicity in, these scandals, the ecclesiastical hierarchy was consequently ill-prepared to propagate and enforce its vision of establishment Buddhism because the public was so disenchanted with the moral decay that seemed to permeate the Sangha. Thus, “from the late 1980s to the onset of the economic crisis in mid-1997 there was a rapid decline in Thai politicians’ and bureaucrats’ interest in controlling Buddhism, except to deal with more extreme cases of clerical corruption or immorality” (Jackson 1999b: 286). Institutional Sangha reform was politically too dangerous and offered too few visible political benefits, and so an implicit acceptance of the status quo, including acceptance of a weakened establishment Buddhism, seemed like the most appealing strategy to both politicians and state bureaucrats alike. Besides, most politicians and bureaucrats were no different from most other Thais in finding numerous non-establishment, alternative teachings, practices, and movements appealing as potential sources of religious legitimization or world-transforming supramundane sacrality.

As Jackson notes, “This retreat of the state created a depoliticized space within which popular religious movements, which in earlier decades may have incited political intervention, were able to flourish” (Jackson 1999b: 286). With the retreat of this disciplining state power, the

religious diversity and innovation endemically characteristic of mainstream Thai popular religiosity could now blossom and expand in the public sphere, especially now that these same impulses were reinforced more generally by social developments such as deepening urbanization, an expanding civil society, and a flourishing popular consumer culture. Consequently, while the fortunes of an establishment state Buddhism were in relative decline, the fortunes of religious actors not beholden to establishment state or modernist reform Buddhism were revived in a very public manner. The state's ability to shape, and even determine, public or mainstream religious expression was curtailed, and non-state actors and forces took on a much more prominent and significant role in publicly reproducing and rethinking the character of Thai Buddhist religiosity, especially with regards to those religious beliefs, practices and experiences outside of the direct institutional control and disciplining power of the official Sangha authorities.

The general consequence of these historical developments was an efflorescence of religious actors, beliefs, practices and experiences outside, or on the margins, of establishment state and modernist reform Buddhism. This efflorescence was evident to close observers during the 1980s even as critical attention focused on the recent rise of new and alternative Buddhist movements centered around monks. It was publicly unavoidable by the 1990s when numerous increasingly popular groups, organizations, movements, and subcultures not centered on Buddhist monks or organizationally intertwined with either the state-controlled Sangha or moralizing reformist movements increasingly occupied a more prominent place in the aggressively national mass media, as well as within the public sphere more generally. By the 1990s, therefore, the alternative, monastic-centered Buddhist movements which had emerged during the 1970s and 1980s on the margins of establishment Buddhism yet within the formal

institutional boundaries of the state-controlled Sangha were now competing for public prominence and loyal followers with an expanding range of increasingly public religious groups, movements, organizations, and subcultures that were rarely associated with the Sangha in any direct or formal way and which were rarely organized around Buddhist monks. Nonetheless, for the most part these latter representatives of popular religiosity also seeking a legitimate status within mainstream Buddhism publicly asserted that they too were properly Buddhist as well, or at least not in conflict with the foundational beliefs and values they believed undergirded the essence of Thai Theravada Buddhism.

Numerous distinct constellations of belief and practice, leaders and followers, forms of social organization and orientations to supramundane sacrality gained increased prominence on the public urban religious landscape during these decades. Considered as a whole, they fostered a distinct character and definition to popular and mainstream Thai religiosity in the 1980s and 1990s that differed from previous eras. Several of these constellations, moreover, reflected novel organizational, ideological and ritual developments within the field of Thai popular religiosity.

First, there emerged diffuse national ‘cultic’ movements within no specific leader, no overarching institutional organization, and no primary center of collective worship. Two of the most prominent and popular examples of such innovative religiosity were the ‘cults’ centered on devotion to and worship of the apotheosized Thai monarch King Chulalongkorn<sup>144</sup> and the compassionate Mahayana bodhisattva Kuan Im.<sup>145</sup> Second, more formally organized groups of

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<sup>144</sup> Jackson (1999b: 266-268) provides a brief overview of the devotional movement centered on Chulalongkorn. Nithi (1993) provides one of the earliest discussions of the movement as an urban-based religious phenomenon which appeals to middle-class aspirations for economic prosperity and a responsive state bureaucracy governed by law and meritocracy. Stengs (1999, 2002, 2009) examines the movement in greater detail as a personality cult fueled by the mass media and popular culture and as emblematic of broader middle-class religious aspirations for a lifestyle of modest asceticism and apotropaic intervention.

<sup>145</sup> Jackson (1999b: 268-271) provides a brief overview of the devotional movement centered on Kuan Im and argues correctly that the movement signifies the intimate integration of the Sino-Thai into Thai society and culture, an increased openness on the part of Thai culture to appropriating Chinese cultural elements, and the renewed self-

devout lay practitioners also grew and flourished. One such organization located in Bangkok was the Society for Chanting the Venerable Chinnapanchon Incantation (*Chomrom Suadmon Phra Khatha Chinnapanchon*).<sup>146</sup> Third, there appeared on the religious scene an increasing number of diverse devotional movements centered on individual Buddhist monks who were perceived to be endowed with special esoteric knowledge, ritual skills, and supramundane potency. Such monks belong to a long-standing tradition of rustic and/or ascetic renunciants who have become famous for their ability to provide auspiciousness, good fortune and success to people in need of protection and well-being.<sup>147</sup> Finally, a dizzying number of devotional movements and organizations emerged which were centered around non-monastic religious specialists and expert virtuosos perceived as objects of veneration, as repositories of esoteric knowledge, and as fonts of sacral potency. These types of specialists included astrologers, Brahmins, fortune tellers, magicians, exorcists and others who could broadly be defined as an ‘occult’ master (whether labeled as *mau*, *khru*, or *ajan*).<sup>148</sup>

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confidence and pride of the Sino-Thai community in its Chinese cultural heritage. Nithi (1994), again, provides some of the earliest extensive reflections on the movement and its appropriation within existing Thai popular religiosity as a cult of commercial success.

<sup>146</sup> This group is discussed in some detail by Stengs (2002) and Stengs (2009).

<sup>147</sup> Terwiel (1994) examines the “magical” ritual practices of rural monks and their involvement in providing worldly blessings and auspiciousness despite the theological conflicts which he perceives between these practices and doctrinalist reform Buddhism. Tambiah (1984) explores the cult of Buddhist meditative renunciants, saints and amulets in Thailand in the 1970s and 1980s in the context of Theravada Buddhism’s long-standing canonical and institutional elaborations upon monks, renunciation, morality, sacrality and charisma. Jackson (1999b: 272-273) provides a brief overview of “magical monks” in the context of Thai popular religiosity in the 1990s more generally. Jackson (1999a) examines in close detail the symbolic meanings circulating around one such movement focused on Luang Phau Khoun, a highly popular “magical monk” of the 1990s. See also Pattana (2005a).

<sup>148</sup> This list of specialists is hardly exhaustive and only covers some of the more common and traditionally recognized categories of practitioners within the field of mainstream popular religiosity. In fact, comprehensiveness is impossible as there is a great deal of specialization within and synthesis between different types of practitioners, supramundane power, esoteric knowledge, and ritual techniques. The highly unsystematized and uncoded nature of the knowledge and techniques in circulation within the field of popular religiosity, moreover, ensures the futility of seeking any comprehensive accounting which emphasizes clearly bounded discreteness, even provisionally. In addition, given the highly non-institutionalized and unregulated character of the roles, knowledge and practices involved, constant gradual innovation is endemic among these specialist practitioners. Innovation and diversification, as well, are aided by the contemporary social ecology of urbanism as well as the more recent heightened competition between practitioners due to both spatial contiguity and the subtle influence of an explicit ideology of individual competition embedded in the work ethic of capitalist production.

Hence, during the efflorescence of popular religiosity in the 1980s and 1990s, an already existing diversity increased even further. Traditional forms of personal devotion, collective worship, ritual supplication and “magical” manipulation were reconceptualized and elaborated upon in new ways, even as novel forms of devotion, worship and supplication were interjected into the already complex mix of thaumaturgic options. An example of this type of innovation can be found in the suburbs of Bangkok where there was a famous and wealthy religious specialist who, although not possessed by any divinities, nonetheless employs a unique ritual technique which induces trance and possession-like behavior in his clients, behavior which he claim will help to resolve their personal psychic and social dilemmas. The therapeutic value of this technique is increased because this healer simultaneously employs esoteric knowledge that compels various spirits, such as Nang Kwak, to descend and auspiciously bless these clients while they are in trance. Neither spirit medium, magician or Brahmin, he nonetheless draws on knowledge, techniques and behavior associated with all three of these roles in a therapeutic technique he claims, moreover, to have learned from a now dead but esteemed monastic meditation master.

This very public symbolic and social revitalization, diversification, and elaboration formed the essential sociocultural backdrop against which professional spirit mediums sought to carve out their own unique social and religious identity amidst great social change. Thus, as they struggled, individually and collectively, to establish their own unique religious authority, authenticity and legitimacy within the wider field of mainstream Thai popular religiosity, spirit mediums were constantly engaged in a subtle, simultaneous dialectic of identification and differentiation, of alliance and conflict with a wide assortment of religious actors, beliefs, practices and experiences within the generalized domain of Thai religiosity. Buddhist monks and

the established Sangha comprised, not surprisingly, the most socially prominent and culturally prestigious axis of contrastive self-identification for professional spirit mediums. Thus, those professional spirit mediums I encountered in Bangkok tended to be more concerned with their public self-image vis-à-vis monks than any other category of religious actors. Nonetheless, professional spirit mediums were also frequently engaged in efforts designed to selectively cultivate forms of identification with and differentiation from the wide assortment of other non-monastic religious specialists as well. In an increasingly public, increasingly legitimate, and increasingly diversified field of mainstream popular Buddhist religiosity, professional spirit mediums struggled to achieve that careful balance of particular cosmological beliefs and ritual practices, particular worldly benefits and transcendent sacral experiences, that would solidify their potentially tenuous hold on religious authority and legitimacy while simultaneously enabling them to stake out the possibility of greater authenticity and public recognition in the future.

### **The Historical Emergence and Expansion of Professional Spirit Mediums in the Post-World War II Era**

Currently, scholars possess very little solid, detailed or comprehensive data regarding the historical emergence and expansion of professional spirit mediums as a new category of religious actors in Thai society. Most information about the early history of professional spirit mediums has been obtained through inference from interviews with professional mediums beginning in the 1970s. Such information is often difficult to verify or confirm through either statements by other parties or archival research. Moreover, relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to professional spirit mediums and most of that attention has focused on current synchronic

descriptions and analyses. Detailed and careful ethnohistorical investigations into the emergence of professional spirit mediums have yet to be pursued. Nonetheless, various scholars studying professional spirit mediums in different regions of Thailand have tentatively advanced somewhat differing accounts of the historical emergence of professional spirit mediums which in many respects, nonetheless, are in general agreement, at least with regards to the broad contours of the historical narrative they describe. These historical reconstructions and my own observations in the field in Bangkok reinforce how deepening capitalist development, an expanding civil society, and intensifying urbanization have helped fuel the growth of professional spirit mediums, their increasing prominence within the Thai public sphere, and the emergence of their relatively distinct religious subculture in Bangkok.

Professional spirit mediums seem to have begun to emerge slowly on the urban religious landscape of Thailand primarily in the two decades following World War II. Moreover, it would appear to be the case that they emerged earliest in the largest urban environments and have only more recently emerged within smaller urban or semi-urban settings. Thus, for instance, Yagi cites survey data from the 1970s which indicates that although a small number of professional mediums were practicing in Bangkok during the 1930s, the majority of those surveyed had become mediums in the immediate two decades after World War. In addition, in subsequent decades more and more professional spirit mediums began emerging in those provinces neighboring Bangkok – Thonburi, Samut Prakan and Nonthaburi – which eventually were absorbed into the growing Bangkok metropolitan region in subsequent decades (Yagi 1988: 32). Similarly, Irvine's path-breaking research of professional spirit mediums in one of the largest urban centers outside of Bangkok, the city of Chiang Mai in the North, reveals a similar trend: a small number of mediums after World War II followed by steady and accelerating growth.



According to Irvine's informants there were only about 30 mediums in Chiang Mai in the 1950s, yet the total number had grown, by Irvine's own provisional estimate in 1977, to roughly 250 to 300 mediums (Irvine 1982: 317). Tanabe, in turn, estimates that by 1986 there were roughly 500 professional spirit mediums in urban Chiang Mai (Tanabe 2002: 65, fn 6), while Morris in the early 1990s finds Tanabe's estimate to conform with her own sense of the size of the Chiang Mai medium community, even though her informants claim that the city was home to 800 to 1100 mediums (Morris 2000: 236). In the still smaller urban center of Khorat, a prominent provincial capital in Thailand's Northeast, one of Pattana's key informants explained that there were only a handful of professional spirit mediums active in the city in the late 1960s, but that by the mid-1990s the city was home to 200 to 300 mediums, although only 50 or so of those were actually providing services to the general public (Pattana 1999: 97-98). My own informants in Bangkok in the mid-1990s would toss off estimates that Thailand's capital was currently filled with "thousands" of spirit mediums (by which they clearly meant "professional" spirit mediums), but given the immense size of the porous Bangkok metropolitan region it was impossible to carry out any kind of survey which plausibly could test the accuracy of such assertions.<sup>149</sup>

Even if the total number of professional spirit mediums and their rate of demographic increase are difficult to measure, however, their rising public prominence is less difficult to explain or gauge, especially when compared with other forms of spirit possession or spirit

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<sup>149</sup> Efforts to estimate the number of (professional) spirit mediums throughout Thailand are even more sketchy. One journalist, after considerable research and time spent visiting and talking to spirit mediums in the late 1980s, estimated that there were almost one million mediums in Thailand (Suchada 1988: 91). In December 1995 the Research Center of the Thai Farmers Bank, relying on the assumption that every village in Thailand was home to an average of 1 to 2 spirit mediums, projected that the country as a whole had almost 100,000 mediums (Thai Farmers Bank Research Center 1995: 5). The highly speculative nature of both estimates is obvious, given that neither relies on even partial or preliminary surveys or sampling. The former estimate, in particular, strains the limits of credibility, however, asking one to believe that approximately 1 out of every 60 Thai citizens is a spirit medium. Although factually dubious, both estimates, nonetheless, clearly convey the widespread presumption among many Thais that spirit mediums in contemporary Thailand are demographically numerous, and that, moreover, they are more numerous and more publicly prominent than was the case in the past.

mediumship in Thailand. The increasing prominence of professional spirit mediums would seem to be the result of at least two general trends. First, as indicated above, there is the shared sense among interested academic researchers and mass media journalists, as well as among mediums themselves, that the total number of professional spirit mediums had been increasing at a rapid pace since the 1970s, even if no precise quantification is possible. Second, many scholars have also noted that during these same decades those forms of spirit mediumship associated with both ancestral or territorial spirit cults have either declined or retained their popularity only by becoming more like professional spirit mediums. Thus, several scholars have observed that ancestral spirit cults, and by implication the number of spirit mediums associated with them, have been declining in social relevance more recently (Mougne 1984; Muecke 1984; Irvine 1984), although those cults that have experienced something of a modest revival have downplayed their more traditional communal focus and have highlighted, instead, a diverse range of ritual practices and religious goals aimed primarily at the needs of individuals and households, practices and goals which echo, in fact, the non-communal orientation of professional spirit mediums (Anan 2003). Although the changing status of territorial guardian spirit cults is less clear, it is nonetheless evident that many of the most locally prominent guardian spirits in particular regions have retained their religious prominence in part by becoming important possessing deities among “free-lance” professional spirit mediums who have no formal affiliation, however, with any collective communal cult of the guardian spirits (Morris 2000; Keyes 2002).

In general, then, those forms of spirit mediumship strongly identified with addressing and regulating matters of communal social propriety and membership, but which also deal with individual health problems, have declined since the 1970s. This same time period, however, has

witnessed the flourishing of a form of spirit mediumship focused primarily on meeting individual religious needs through participation in typically smaller and more intimate personality-based entourages and collectivities which are, for the most part, fundamentally unconcerned with, or at least not deeply embedded in, any more expansive or demanding forms of communal sociality or solidarity beyond those of the entourages themselves.<sup>150</sup>

The relative social and cultural prominence, even dominance, of professional spirit mediumship in relation to other forms of spirit mediumship in contemporary Thailand has also been reinforced by the influence of the mass media, particularly the popular print mass media. When both the electronic and the print mass media produce journalistic accounts about spirit mediumship, they tend to focus their reporting more often than not on professional spirit mediums. Even more importantly, since the 1980s a whole genre of popular magazines has arisen which report primarily upon popular religiosity and the wide range of practitioners, techniques and concerns which are central to mainstream Thai popular religion. These magazines, consequently, are filled with regular columns, articles and fictional stories about miraculous events, uncanny haunting, magical monks, various types of *mau*, spirit mediums, astrology and other divination techniques, Buddhist amulets, spirit attacks, and potent spirit

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<sup>150</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that although Thai communal spirit cults and spirit mediums, which are deeply embedded in the traditional social organization of rural village life, have declined as processes of urbanization, nationalization and capitalization have transformed rural social and economic existence during the last fifty or so years, other long-standing communal traditions of collective ritual and spirit mediumship, like those found within the Chinese Vegetarian Festival, have – by contrast – flourished and expanded (Cohen 2001: 60-64). In fact, much of the growth in the number of spirit mediums participating in Phuket's annual Vegetarian Festival has not occurred among those mediums formally affiliated with those established Chinese temples on the island that participate in the festival. Rather, the increasing number of mediums in the festival has occurred primarily among those unaffiliated spirit mediums who arrive uninvited at Chinese temples in order to take part in those activities, such as public processions, within which spirit possession is symbolically crucial. Interviews with my informants in Bangkok indicated, moreover, that a number of these unaffiliated spirit mediums are actually professional spirit mediums from Bangkok and elsewhere in Thailand, especially mediums for the Chinese goddess Kuan Im, who regularly travel to Phuket to take part in the annual festival.

shrines.<sup>151</sup> Although individual magazines may not always last very long, the general genre persists, and when these magazines report on spirit mediums, they almost invariably focus on professional spirit mediums. In the process, their journalistic accounts typically tend to reproduce and circulate those self-understandings, interpretations and rhetorical arguments found within the general subculture of professional spirit mediums. As a result, their historically unique vision and interpretation of spirit possession and spirit mediumship gains a place of privileged prominence and even dominance within the reading public's perception and understanding of spirit possession and mediumship. Distributed widely, yet nonetheless unevenly, across Thailand, these magazines and their journalistic accounts inevitably inflate the social and cultural prominence of professional spirit mediums within the general public's consciousness, especially in comparison with other types of spirit mediumship also found in late twentieth-century Thailand.

Just as there is much quantitative uncertainty about the changing number of professional spirit mediums, there also currently exists no substantial data on the patterns of diffusion or underlying social processes which have fueled the spread of professional spirit mediumship in Thai society during the last forty to fifty years. Based on my observations and interviews with informants, however, I speculate that the recent expanding presence and influence of professional spirit mediumship, as an ideology and a practice, is primarily reliant upon the slowly ramifying social connections forged through migration, frequent travel and the mass media. Numerous professional spirit mediums I spoke with originally lived and practiced outside of Bangkok, but then subsequently moved to Bangkok only later in their careers. They

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<sup>151</sup> Some of the most established, longest running magazines of the 1990s in this genre were: "Great Unexpected Luck" (*Mahalap*), "Mysterious Tales of the Unknown" (*Rueang Rern Lap*), and "Extraordinary Miracles" (*Mahasajan*). Other less established magazines I encountered during my fieldwork in the mid-1990s include "Precious Seal of Great Unexpected Luck" (*Dueang Mahalap*), "Supreme Unexpected Luck" (*Aphi Mahalap*), "The Frightening" (*Khayao Khwan*), "There Really are Spirits" (*Phi Mi Jing*), and "Spirit Cemetery" (*Susan Phi*).

nonetheless retained vestigial social ties to patrons, followers and other mediums upcountry and would occasionally travel back to the locales from which they originated in order to visit or participate in rituals. As their number of followers and clients in the Bangkok metropolitan region expanded, the geographic breadth of their social networks of interaction and patronage, within and beyond Bangkok, expanded as well. As a result, frequently these mediums were drawn into wider and wider circuits of geographically dispersed social relations as they became involved in the personal and household affairs of followers or clients whose lives often straddled time spent between Bangkok and different upcountry provinces. In all of these ways, I argue, the sheer presence of professional spirit mediums has slowly and incrementally expanded across the Thai social landscape and into new geographic settings, both urban and rural.

Many Bangkok mediums I knew also frequently traveled around the country in order to lead or participate in various ritual ceremonies. Common reasons for travel included the annual *wai khru* ceremony of their teacher, a peer or perhaps a former disciple who was now also a spirit medium. They also traveled to participate in events such as the consecration of a follower's household shrine or the new abode of a fellow medium, the performance of a specially requested divination or blessing ceremony for clients who could not travel to Bangkok, and participation in *thaut pha pa* or other religious ceremonies held at various upcountry Buddhist temples, shrines or pilgrimage sites. In all of these ways, a single social connection can help to propel Bangkok professional spirit mediums into circulation beyond the immediate geographic locale of their own personal abode, and even the Bangkok metropolitan region more generally. Indeed, Bangkok professional spirit mediums frequently traveled through often otherwise unfamiliar locales as professional spirit mediums, in other words as active religious practitioners providing a variety of ritual services to interested parties. These clients or followers, in turn, frequently

invited their friends and kin – some of whom had no real previous exposure to professional spirit mediums – to take part in these ceremonies. In this way, by simply carrying out those everyday religious responsibilities expected of them by followers, clients and fellow mediums, each individual medium produces the unintended consequence that the general image, presence, beliefs and practices of professional spirit mediums slowly and almost imperceptibly gain wider social exposure and cultural familiarity within an ever expanding and diversifying cross-section of Thai classes, communities and locales.<sup>152</sup>

Finally, the expanding presence and influence of professional spirit mediumship as both an ideology and a practice has been aided by the Thai mass media, in particular the print media. The genre of mass market magazines focused on Thai popular religiosity is one avenue through which the acceptability and legitimacy of professional spirit mediums have been advanced by certain segments of the mass media. Those articles about professional spirit mediums which are regularly published in popular print magazines like *Mahalap*, *Rueang Rern Lap*, and *Mahasajan* are not, after all, simply neutral journalistic reporting. Rather, they are more like promotional advertisements. Typically they first recount the life histories of individual mediums based on interviews with the mediums, and then follow these accounts with numerous followers' and clients' personal tales of miraculous assistance provided by these same mediums. In the end, these articles, in essence, function as endorsements of the authenticity and efficacy of particular mediums, and, by implication, of professional spirit mediumship in general. And by closing each article with directions explaining how to find each medium's *tamnak*, what days and times the

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<sup>152</sup> Pattana also comments on the informal social networks that shape the lives and activities of professional spirit mediums. He observes that these networks are strongest at the local and regional level, and that the Khorat mediums whom he studied belonged to a regional network of regularly interacting mediums that circulated between Bangkok, Buriram, Nakhon Sawan, Saraburi, Phang-ngo and Chonburi (Pattana 1999: 187). His informants also claimed that there are regional centers of spirit mediums throughout the country, such as the provinces of Chonburi, Nakhon Sawan, Khorat and Buriram (Pattana 1999: 91).

mediums receive clients, and how to contact them in advance by phone, these magazines serve a key, practical function in not only rendering professional spirit mediumship known, acceptable and legitimate, but also in making its practitioners simply more easily accessible to those interested or intrigued members of the general Thai mass market reading public as well.

In addition, one can also find small books about professional spirit mediumship for sale in the religion section of many Thai-language bookstores. One author in particular, Wo. Cinpradit, has been prolific in publishing a series of books which explain the ideas behind professional spirit mediumship as well as the rituals performed by professional spirit mediums (Wo. Cinpradit, n.d.; Wo. Cinpradit 1995; Wo. Cinpradit 1998). Although some of his books are explicitly labeled as “manuals” (*samud khu muea*), all of them describe not only who professional spirit mediums are, but also their valuable place within contemporary Thai Buddhism and Thai society, and the various ethical and ritual norms they should follow. In addition, they also combine these descriptions in an eclectic fashion with detailed explanations of specific ritual techniques, transcriptions of important chants and spells used in these rituals, the life histories of various mediums that Wo. Cinpradit knows, and legitimizing interpretations of relevant points of Buddhist theology. These books in many ways, like magazines about popular religiosity, also introduce and legitimate professional spirit mediumship to an anonymous Thai reading public, although in this case the author also seems to intend them to serve as introductory manuals for junior mediums. Although no beginning medium, of course, could claim authenticity and authority simply on the basis of these books, they are interesting as the rare example of a relatively codified and explicit explanation, justification and systematization of the details of what is otherwise a mode of religious knowledge and practice that is typically non-systematic and which is socially transmitted and learned primarily through oral communication and shared

practice. From another angle, however, these books also serve as yet another avenue through which the print mass media selectively functions to spread, and even legitimate, the ideology and practice of professional spirit mediumship within contemporary Thai society. As far as I am aware, there are no comparable book-length expositions or justification about other modalities of Thai spirit mediumship which seek, in a similar advocacy-like fashion, to make those forms of spirit possession understandable and acceptable to the anonymous Thai reading public.<sup>153</sup>

### **Rethinking the Sociocultural Dynamics underlying the Historical Emergence of Professional Spirit Mediumship**

Given the limited historiographic materials available regarding the emergence and expansion of Thai professional spirit mediumship, it is difficult to precisely delineate the historical relationship between this form of spirit possession and mediumship and those other forms that preceded it. Nonetheless, the unique character of professional spirit mediumship is not simply a product of idiosyncratic, individual innovation regarding discrete cultural themes, symbolic and ritual forms, or social relations. Numerous elements of the ideology, practice and sociality characteristic of professional spirit mediumship, rather, parallel quite closely a variety of elements found in other cultural forms of spirit possession, spirit mediumship and popular religiosity more generally in contemporary Thailand. Consequently, it is difficult to imagine that these innovations did not rely, at least in part, on the selective borrowing and modification of other pre-existing forms and modalities of religious belief and practice.

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<sup>153</sup> The most comprehensive introductions to traditional manuals in Thailand and their social and textual organization and transmission of esoteric knowledge are Brun (1990) and Reynolds (2006). Reynolds (2011) discusses traditional manuals and esoteric knowledge, masculinity and violence in the context of a famous Thai policeman's career. Farrelly, Reynolds and Walker (2011) discuss traditional manuals and esoteric knowledge in the context of Thai agricultural and ecological practices.



Not surprisingly, most scholars have explicitly argued that professional (or “urban” or “modern”) spirit mediumship is best characterized as an adaptation and reconstitution of those forms of Thai spirit mediumship associated with ancestral and guardian spirit cults (Irvine 1982; Wijeyewardene 1986; Yagi 1988; Muecke 1992; Pattana 1999; Morris 2000, Tanabe 2002, Yos 2003). In the broad outlines of their different historical contextualizations most scholars present a similar overarching narrative. As prior forms of localized, bounded rural sociality have been disrupted and undermined by economic, political and social change after World War II, spirit mediumship in ancestral and guardian spirit cults has been undermined progressively along with those cults. At the same time, however, many of the general cosmological beliefs, cultural values, social roles and ritual practices associated with this “traditional” spirit mediumship have been modified, reinvented and reconstructed to meet the different, and more individualized, religious needs and therapeutic challenges of an increasingly urban, national, and capitalist society and culture.

The main analytic differences between these similar historical narratives reside in which structural forces each particular scholar sees as predominantly driving these changes and the relative emphasis they place on particular analytic themes within their overarching explanatory narrative. Hence, Irvine emphasizes the determining power of an unequal process of national development and modernization which produces “the breakdown of village-level authority and kinship structures” and “the polarization of village communities into a landless majority and a landowning minority.” As a result, ideas and practices concerning mediumship are “redeployed” in an urban context in order to meet individual, rather than communal, concerns and to achieve material success and improve social status within a new consumer society (Irvine 1984: 318-320). Tanabe emphasizes how the institutions of the nation-state and the capitalist market in

tandem are disrupting not only traditional modalities of local identity and sociality but also those embodied therapeutic techniques of rural life – such as, for example, traditional mediumship – conventionally used to foster ontological security against anxiety, chance, risk and the unknown. In the reorganized spatial, social and economic environments of an urbanized, industrial capitalist nation-state, Tanabe perceives a diverse flourishing of new techniques which replace an older idiom of grounded, communal “bodily safety” with a new idiom of mobile, individual “material prosperity and life security.” Professional spirit mediumship with its emphasis upon a playful, embodied stabilization of ontological security constitutes one such reconstituted technique (Tanabe 2002: 52-54). Pattana downplays the centrality of broader political economic transformations in traditional ideas about locality, sociality, morality and identity, and instead emphasizes the importance of rapid urbanization and rural-to-urban migration. Professional spirit mediumship, in his view, is the product of urbanized, subaltern migrants to the city who are adapting “folk ancestral spirit-medium cults” that are in decline in rural areas in order to make these beliefs and practices “meaningful and relevant to their urban lifestyle” (Pattana 1999: 90-93).

All of these specific inflections on a shared more general narrative about the historical transformation and sociocultural reconstitution of a set of traditional religious beliefs, practices, social relations and experiences are broadly convincing. In combination they help to explain numerous characteristics of professional spirit mediumship which have been widely recognized by academics and even non-academics: its prevalence within the greater social and moral uncertainty of an urbanized environment and a market economy; its disarticulation from more traditional communal forms of social identity and ritual practice; its emphasis upon addressing individual rather than collective concerns; its proclivity for defining success in an idiom of

competitive material prosperity and improved social status; its appeal to those who suffer from a psychological and social deprivation or alienation thematized as isolation, displacement or abandonment. In these ways, historical transformations in the beliefs and practices associated with spirit mediumship simply exemplify those general structural transformations in the ideology, practice, and social organization of religiosity in post-World War II Thailand which I discussed earlier in this chapter.

At the same time, this historical narrative in which professional spirit mediumship represents the reworking of ancestral and guardian spirit cults is inadequate as an historical explanation in several regards. First, it fails to account for what I suspect was the differential and selective appeal of ancestral and guardian spirits to professionalizing spirit mediums in an urban setting, as well as the attraction of these mediums to spirits traditionally unaffiliated with either of those cults. As a close reading of the ethnographic literature seems to indicate and van Esterik explicitly observes, both ancestral spirits in general and guardian spirits with dominion over the more narrow geographic settings of households, compounds and villages were classified and interpreted usually as *phi* or perhaps *jao*. Guardian spirits with more expansive domains of control such as regions, provinces, the kingdom or the heavens, however, were more likely to be interpreted as *thep* (van Esterik 1982: 11). Interestingly, van Esterik also notes that villagers with a wider cultural knowledge of the world outside the village were more likely to label and treat lower level guardian spirits like the *thep* of higher domains. Over time, therefore, I suspect that professionalizing spirit mediums in an urban setting selectively drew on primarily those more elevated guardian spirits typically categorized as *thep* while also occasionally reinterpreting and reclassifying less elevated *phi* or *jao* as *thep* as well.

Yet over time, professionalizing spirit mediums also reached out beyond the category of generally recognized guardian spirits to claim possession by deified monks, royal figures and heavenly deities that were classified as *thep* and *jao*. Although typically not recognized formally as a guardian spirit or the center of a collective cult of worship, these monks, royalty and deities were valorized and celebrated as national heroes and protectors within the nationalist discourse of modernizing Thailand, a discourse which was propagated widely through the state-dominated educational system and mass media during the era of nation building. Consequently, professional spirit mediumship was the product of a selective reinterpretation of not only local ancestral and guardian spirit cults and cosmologies, but also key figures and themes drawn from the modernizing Thai state's mythic secular cult and cosmology of nationalist heroes and heroines as well.

Second, this general historical narrative of the emergence of professional spirit mediumship downplays or ignores the ways in which professional spirit mediumship was profoundly, if indirectly, influenced by both a modernist reform Buddhism and an establishment state Buddhism which together refashioned in contrasting ways the ideological, ritual and social definitions of Thai religious common sense. If professional spirit mediumship was originally very much an urban phenomenon as most scholars assert, then one can presume that these professionalizing mediums were, in general, also much more aware than their predominantly rural predecessors of both the discursive condemnation and sporadic official repression by Thailand's moralizing modernists of beliefs or practices labeled as animistic, magical or supernatural and the cultural trivialization and social erasure by centralizing establishmentarians of beliefs and practices labeled as folk, customary or backwards.

It is the dominant cultural prestige and social and institutional hegemony of modernist reform Buddhism and establishment state Buddhism that in large part explains why the ideology, pantheon and ritual practices of professional spirit mediums expanded in the particular directions they have in the post-war era. It also explains why professional mediums progressively over time sought to reconceptualize more and more explicitly their beliefs, practices and experiences in such a way as to emphasize both their break with the increasingly discredited and stigmatized world of animism, local spirit cults and *phi* (within which spirit mediumship was traditionally located according to anthropological and historical scholarship) and their identification with those more amenable goals, beliefs and practices located within conventional mainstream popular Buddhism (within which professional spirit mediumship now seeks to locate itself in a post-reform, post-establishment Buddhist era). This trajectory of ideological and social change, however, is largely left unaddressed when the emergence of professional spirit mediumship is explained as fundamentally the reconstitution of those forms of mediumship associated with ancestral and guardian spirit cults. Although most scholars note the increasingly Buddhist character of professional spirit mediumship, few explicitly theorize what historical and structural changes within Thai Theravada Buddhism explain why this new relationship to Buddhism arose and why it has been advanced so strongly by spirit mediums themselves.

Finally, by focusing almost exclusively on the relationship between professional spirit mediums and ancestral and guardian spirit cults, most scholars have failed to recognize, or neglected to pay analytic attention to, the fact that historically contemporary professional spirit mediumship also has been influenced significantly by its relationship to those other forms of spirit possession, mediumship, devotionism and esotericism found within the total field of post-

World War II Thai popular religiosity.<sup>154</sup> Envisioning professional spirit mediumship as primarily a reworking of those forms of spirit mediumship typically associated with ancestral and guardian spirit cults, however, obscures these other influences. It also obscures what these influences reveal about professional spirit mediumship as a contemporary social and cultural phenomenon and about the changing character of Thai popular religiosity in a post-reform, post-establishment Buddhism era.

Although a certain amount of speculation is inevitable in trying to discern these relationships given the limited existing historiographic record, I believe that some speculation is not only warranted but necessary. It is particularly necessary if one wishes to try to understand contemporary professional spirit mediumship more comprehensively as a complexly articulated form of emergent religiosity which draws upon many distinct historical traditions of mainstream popular religiosity in its current configuration. In particular, contemporary professional spirit mediumship in Bangkok in the mid-1990s reveals the persistent influence of folk and court Brahmanism, Chinese spirit mediumship and popular religiosity, and Hindu popular religiosity and mediumship.<sup>155</sup>

The significant influence of Thai folk and court Brahmanism on contemporary professional spirit mediumship is most clearly reflected in the importance of ideas about the

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<sup>154</sup> Pattana is one of the few scholars who has explicitly addressed the historical influence of a wider range of modes or traditions of Thai religiosity on the emergence of contemporary urban spirit mediumship. Thus, in addition to folk spirit-medium cults, he also notes the influence of Buddhist millenarianism, Court Brahmanistic rituals, and Chinese and Indian religiosity on the beliefs and practices of contemporary spirit mediums in Khorat in the Northeast of Thailand (Pattana 1999: 88-96). Unfortunately, Pattana mostly only notes these general influences, without specifically explicating or even speculating more precisely on how exactly these influences have shaped urban spirit mediumship or what particular elements of ideology, practice or social relations within modern urban spirit mediumship reveal the presence of this influence. In what follows, I begin to delineate more precisely what I see as the differential influence of these and other traditions of mainstream popular religiosity on professional spirit mediumship.

<sup>155</sup> In many ways, the sociocultural influence of these three traditions of religiosity serve as a historical confirmation of that tripartite emic model of *thai*, *jin*, and *khaek* which Bangkok professional spirit mediums themselves employ when discussing cultural and religious plurality within their subculture.

empowered teacher (*khru*) and the practices of the *phithi wai khru* (venerating the teacher ceremony) within the subculture. Previously unrelated to prior forms of indigenous spirit mediumship, these ideas and practices have become central to the meaning and significance of professional spirit mediumship. This influence of folk and court Brahmanism is also reflected in the expanding range of ritual techniques of thaumaturgic and therapeutic intervention which mediums now deploy, many of which were formerly identified more exclusively with folk Brahmanism and religious practitioners such as *mau* or monks. It is not clear whether the inclusion of these elements within the ideological and ritual repertoire of professional spirit mediumship reflects the historical influence of either folk Brahmanism, court Brahmanism, or both. It is likely, however, that urban areas in general provided professional mediums with numerous concrete examples of teacher-student lineages and entourages, all organized around the idea of instruction by an empowered teachers and all embedded within either folk or court Brahmanical traditions. Bangkok as the center of national government, in particular, was a relatively fertile ground within which such teachers and their lineages could survive and prosper, even after the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932 and the declining influence of the Chakri royal aristocracy, which originally was the principle patron for many elite teachers and practitioners within artistic fields.<sup>156</sup> Bangkok was also, of course, the center of a Brahmanical elite that remained affiliated with the Chakri dynasty and court despite the latter's declining influence and power during the first half of the twentieth century.

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<sup>156</sup> Wong discusses in detail how the end of the absolute monarchy and the rise of an anti-royalist nationalism transformed *wai khru* rituals among the musical elite of Bangkok, and the effect these historical developments have had on the organization and transmission of musical knowledge and training in general among Bangkok musicians (Wong 2001: 158-217). Her intriguing analysis of the changing confluence of ritual knowledge, royal patronage and institutional affiliation among twentieth-century musical masters, however, has little direct relevance to the case of professional spirit mediums who always, by contrast, have lacked royal patronage and institutional affiliation due to their stigmatized moral status and marginal religious authority as public figures.

In the mid-1990s, in fact, both the ritual symbolism and certain living representatives of that court-affiliated Brahmanical elite circulated rather prominently within the Bangkok subculture of professional spirit mediums, reflecting in many ways the considerable sacral power and cultural prestige currently associated with Thailand's Chakri dynasty. Individuals and families that claimed to be descendants of royal court Brahmins were active in numerous ways within the subculture. A few served regularly as the master of ceremonies during the annual *wai khru* ceremonies of professional spirit mediums or simply attended other *wai khru* ceremonies as honored guests. Through their advice and leadership, the ritual symbolism and practice of these *wai khru* ceremonies was given the legitimizing imprimatur of presumably court-based royalist aesthetics, ritual technique and esoteric knowledge.

One quite prominent Bangkok Brahmin, moreover, wrote regular columns in several of those mass market magazines which were aimed at the reading public interested in popular religion. One of these columns was in a question and answer format and was designed to authoritatively answer questions about matters of ritual propriety and etiquette regarding the types of ceremonies typically held by mediums. Another column in another magazine was a serialized treatise explaining how to properly perform crucial rituals, such as a *wai khru* ceremony or the propitiation of *jao* and *thep*. These same court Brahmins also participated as devout observers along with professional spirit mediums at large public events such as the annual Navarathri Festival at the main Tamil temple in Bangkok. And during the annual *wai khru* ceremony hosted by these Brahmins at their own personal shrines, professional spirit mediums constituted the vast majority of their guests and fellow participants.

Professional spirit mediumship in Bangkok in the 1990s, therefore, reflected the influence of ideologies, practices and representatives drawn from both the folk and court



Brahmanical traditions. By drawing on all of these elements from both of these Brahmanical traditions, professional mediums clearly sought to infuse their own public personas and practices with a more elevated and acceptable social prestige and religious legitimacy than might otherwise seem to naturally emerge from the claim of spirit possession by itself. In particular, the active participation of Brahmins affiliated with the royal court provided a particularly potent example of social recognition by established religious elites, a recognition which was presumably particularly meaningful to and appreciated by those mediums possessed by royalist heroes from Thailand's historical past, such as King Chulalongkorn. More generally, the ideology of the empowered teacher and the *wai khru* ceremony provided professional spirit mediums with an idiom for negotiating hierarchy, domination and subordination with their peers within their porous, loosely-bounded and non-institutionalized subculture. Similarly, the authoritative ritual and discursive interventions of a select number of court Brahmins provided Bangkok mediums with relatively independent yet sympathetic third parties who could obliquely address and resolve matters of competitive status, propriety and authority as well. In all of these ways, then, folk and court Brahmanism served important ideological and social functions within the subculture and reflected a long-standing strategy of polytropic appropriation among Bangkok's professional spirit mediums.

The influence of Chinese spirit mediumship and popular religiosity also circulated prominently within the Bangkok subculture of professional spirit mediums in the mid-1990s. Many different signs of Chinese popular religion and mediumship flourished among professional spirit mediums. Chinese deities, such as Chi Kong and Kuan Im, who regularly possessed individuals were popular among professional mediums. Chinese ritual practices were also popular among many mediums. Certain mediums possessed by Chinese gods inscribed Chinese-

language charms and bestowed Chinese-language blessings, while Chinese practices of self-mortification were prominently employed during the *wai khru* ceremonies of numerous professional mediums as well. Chinese religious aesthetics infused the architectural, decorative and auditory environment of many abodes (*tamnak*) inhabited by mediums, with these aesthetic elements ranging from devotional music, ritual paraphernalia, charms and amulets to elaborate Chinese-style thrones, altars, statues and attire. Troupes of Chinese mediums who blessed the physical space of abodes, performed feats of miraculous self-mortification, and entertained crowds with dragon dances were hired to take part in some *wai khru* ceremonies, while other mediums who had absorbed the influence of Chinese popular religiosity into their practice incorporated large-scale public processions through nearby streets and neighborhoods into their annual *wai khru* ceremonies. Finally, some Bangkok professional mediums took part in the Phuket Chinese Vegetarian Festival which showcased spirit possession and was organized by the local ethnic Chinese community.<sup>157</sup>

In many ways, actually, the social organization of accomplished and popular professional spirit mediums reflected the style of social organization found among those more entrepreneurial Chinese spirit mediums unaffiliated with any Chinese temple that are identified elsewhere in Southeast Asia (Elliot 1955, Lee 1986). Family and friends were crucial sources of financial and social support. Assistants acted as mediators and interpreters during consultations. Regular hours of consultation were held. A diverse range of therapeutic techniques were employed to answer a wide range of personal problems. When the entourages centered around mediums grew large enough, coordinating committees were often formed to organize divisions of responsibility and labor as the more informal arrangements designated and directly controlled by mediums become

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<sup>157</sup> Cohen (2012) describes in detail the cross-fertilizing linkages between practices of Chinese spirit possession in the Vegetarian Festival and non-Chinese spirit possession and mediumship in Krabi.

too demanding of time and energy. Ultimately, however, it is unclear whether this similarity in the social organization of spirit possession, consultations and relationships with and between followers and clients reflects the direct historical influence of models drawn from Chinese spirit mediumship or other similar models for socially organizing and managing the expanding and ramifying entourages of followers and clients that are also employed by popular “magical” Buddhist monks within the Sangha (see Jackson 1999a for an example of the latter).

In the end, those deities, beliefs and practices drawn from the tradition of Chinese spirit mediumship displayed an uneven distribution and influence within the Bangkok subculture of professional spirit mediumship during the mid-1990s. Few Bangkok mediums exclusively identified themselves as spirit mediums only possessed by Chinese deities, unlike in the South of Thailand where a more exclusive ethnic and religious identification on the part of Chinese spirit mediums is more commonly found among certain segments of religious virtuosos (Cohen 2001). Instead, it was more common to find mediums who selected certain elements drawn from the tradition of Chinese spirit mediumship and juxtaposed them with other rituals, objects or aesthetics that revealed a more conventional Thai or even stereotypic Indian religious sensibility. Thus, the majority of those Bangkok mediums who had been influenced by the tradition of Chinese mediumship and possession idiosyncratically borrowed only some Chinese religious idioms, ideologies, practices and aesthetics. They then integrated these, in an equally idiosyncratic fashion, into an already religiously diverse pantheon of possessing gods, ritual techniques of supramundane assistance, collective ceremonies, and aesthetics of presentational performance which as a totality defined the overall religious character of their abodes.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Often these mediums seem to display signs of an ethnic Chinese heritage in their familial background which would seem to indicate some general long-standing familiarity with the beliefs, practices and ethos of Chinese popular religion, but this dynamic is not always the case. Some Bangkok mediums who are possessed by Chinese gods, moreover, explicitly point out, as if to reinforce the miraculous and thus authentic character of their

Different mediums and abodes displayed different patterns, degrees and foci of borrowing. Nonetheless, there were also many Bangkok mediums who borrowed little or nothing at all from the tradition of Chinese spirit mediumship. Similarly, those Bangkok mediums influenced by Chinese spirit mediumship and popular religion also displayed a selective engagement with these elements beyond the confines of their abodes (*tamnak*). Hence, only some Bangkok mediums – and certainly not all those possessed by Chinese deities – actively participated as spirit mediums in religious festivals, such as the Vegetarian Festival in Phuket, which were organized by the Chinese community and in which spirit possession was a central religious focus. Participation in such public Chinese religious events outside the subculture was a matter of personal choice, desire and convenience, and was certainly not perceived as a necessary obligation enjoined upon any medium possessed by a Chinese deity.

This heightened mutual interpenetration in contemporary Bangkok between a long-standing Thai tradition of Chinese spirit mediumship and the more recent tradition of professional spirit mediumship is probably best envisioned as the product of two distinct historical processes: selective borrowing and selective convergence. By selective borrowing I am referring to already established professional spirit mediums who over time were exposed to Chinese popular religiosity and spirit mediumship and gradually incorporated into their practice and daily life those material, aesthetic and ritual elements they found personally compelling, meaningful and popular. By selective convergence I am referring to those mediums who began their careers as exclusively Chinese spirit mediums but over time expanded their range of possessing deities, ritual practices and devotional aesthetics to include elements drawn from the more cosmopolitan, eclectic mixture found within Bangkok's subculture of professional spirit

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possession, that prior to becoming a medium they knew nothing about Chinese religion and had never heard of their possessing deity or deities, even if their familial backgrounds reveal signs of an ethnic Chinese heritage. Determining the accuracy of such disavowals is, of course, quite difficult if not almost impossible.

mediums as well as the broader landscape of diversifying mainstream popular religiosity. During my fieldwork I became familiar with several mediums who represented the latter process.

Looking at their commemorative photo albums of past abodes and ritual ceremonies and talking with them about the past, it became clear that in earlier years they had projected a very different, more exclusively Chinese religious persona, whereas now their abodes, personal pantheons, and ritual practices reflected the much more diverse set of religious influences of *thai*, *jin* and *khaek* found more commonly among Bangkok professional mediums.

Finally, elements of Hindu popular religiosity and Indian mediumship were also influential within the subculture of professional spirit mediumship in Bangkok in the mid-1990s. Hindu deities were extremely prevalent among the personal pantheons of many professional mediums. Hindu-derived religious iconography, devotional music, aesthetics, ritual regalia and attire were also frequently employed prominently within abodes and by mediums. Moreover, elements explicitly marked as Hindu were displayed prominently in many *wai khru* ceremonies as well. At the end of numerous *wai khru* ceremonies, for instance, mediums included a fire worship ritual (*phithi bucha fai*) that they explicitly interpreted as Hindu in derivation, with the raucous music, dancing and devotions displayed during the worship intended as a means to beseech the supreme (Hindu) *thep* of the heavens to bestow their blessings and favor on everyone who had participated in the ceremony.<sup>159</sup> In addition, some professional mediums hired ethnic Indian musicians and/or ritual experts to preside over certain phases of their *wai khru* ceremonies, infusing these moments, and the ceremony as a whole, with the authority of established Hindu and/or Indian religious experts from outside the subculture of mediums.

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<sup>159</sup> Wo Cinpradit, the self-appointed expert on the topic of spirit mediums who has published numerous popular press books on the topic, describes this *bucha fai* as an innovation in *wai khru* ceremonies which he personally finds “useful” and “valuable” for honoring and spreading the prestige (*kiatkhun*) and charismatic virtue (*barami*) of mediums and the deities that possess them (Wo Cinpradit 1995: 114-119).

Finally, scores of professional spirit mediums prominently participated as devout observers on the final day of the annual Navarathri Festival when several possessed ethnic Indian mediums lead a public procession of worship and blessing through the streets of Bangkok.

Signs of Hindu religiosity were widely distributed throughout the Bangkok subculture of professional spirit mediums, despite the fact that the ethnic Indian community in Thailand is much smaller, much less influential and much less prestigious than the Chinese community. This prevalence of Hindu symbolism, iconography, ritual and aesthetics no doubt reflects the fact that the cosmology, rituals and beliefs of Theravada Buddhism arrived in mainland Southeast Asia already syncretically infused with the fundamentals of the Indian religious worldview and ethos. As a consequence, even beliefs and practices which reveal a more sectarian Hindu thematic focus are assimilated more easily, presumably, into the existing Thai Buddhist traditions of indigenous folk and court Brahmanism than is the case with ideologically and functionally comparable Chinese beliefs and practices. At the same time, the practice of spirit mediumship by ethnic Indians is much less prominent and widespread when compared with its Chinese counterpart. As a result, those particular ritual, ideological and behavioral elements often associated with possession in Hinduism were not widely, if at all, present among Bangkok mediums. Thus for example, practices of self-mortification by Bangkok professional spirit mediums almost always followed the style and techniques found among Chinese mediums, rather than the differing styles and techniques typically employed by Hindu mediums.

What is especially noteworthy about the relationship between professional spirit mediums and Chinese and Hindu mediumship and popular religiosity or court Brahmanism is the typically “unofficial” nature of these relationships. They either involved appropriating symbolic elements and cultural forms more or less widely available in the public domain, incorporating a small,

select number of ritual experts as representatives of these distinct religious traditions into the most important and defining ritual ceremonies within the subculture, or participation at the anonymous public edge of ritual ceremonies organized by these distinct religious communities. Thus, Bangkok professional mediums made an effort to take part in the annual Chinese Vegetarian Festival in Phuket or the Tamil Navarathri festival in Bangkok, but they participated in social spaces beyond the direct control and regulation of Chinese or Hindu religious officials. Tamil Hindus in Bangkok explained to me that Brahmin priests, in fact, prohibited professional mediums from entering inside the Tamil temple during the Navarathri festival, although they could not prevent them from setting up temporary shrines outside the temple along the procession route, just like any other devotee could. Similarly, Cohen explains that in Phuket, Chinese shrine officials find it difficult, if not impossible, to control the number of unaffiliated mediums who participate in processions of self-mortification organized by different temples, even though in principle they should exercise such authority in order to ensure the moral propriety and ritual purity of everyone who participates (Cohen 2001: 117-118).

Thus, although certain high-profile public ceremonial events in which Bangkok professional spirit mediums participate seem on the surface to reveal their recognition and acceptance by more established, acceptable and prestigious religious practitioners, traditions or communities in Thailand, these relationships usually only exist primarily at the insistence of the mediums and very much on the periphery of official religious discourses, events, actors and space. For the most part, the majority of Buddhist monks, folk and court Brahmanical *mau*, Chinese shrine officials and Brahmin temple officials all seem to display a certain stereotypic unease and skepticism with regards to the personal motivations, moral values and religious legitimacy of professional spirit mediums, even as the latter conceive of themselves as pursuing

a path of devotional sacrifice and service which clearly should establish their moral and ritual credentials in the eyes of these other religious practitioners and experts who mediums see as somewhat analogous peers.<sup>160</sup> In this sense, despite their social and symbolic strategies of affiliation, appropriation and identification, Bangkok professional spirit mediums remain, ultimately, essentially peripheral and marginal with regards to those more established, prestigious and authoritative practitioners, traditions and institutions within the expanding and diversifying structure of contemporary mainstream Thai popular religiosity. Although their own practices and beliefs reveal the breadth and depth of the polytropic sensibility of bricolage that informs their own religious identity, the moral, ritual and social hierarchies embedded within normative ideas of Thai religiosity continue to deprive professional mediums, both individually and collectively, of that public authority and legitimacy they so often desire.

## Conclusions

In the second half of the twentieth century, sweeping changes transformed the face of Thai society and culture. Expanding industrial capitalist development, deepening political democratization and intensifying urbanization remade the very immediate, concrete and everyday social worlds within which millions of Thai Buddhists lived and worked. These broad-based, wide-ranging historical developments created new social groups, new social institutions and new social hierarchies. They altered established cultural values, goals and expectations, while opening up new historical possibilities, horizons and opportunities. They reorganized the

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<sup>160</sup> The contrasting perspectives of professional spirit mediums and Thai Hindu elites was captured nicely by an Indian journalist exploring Hinduism in Thailand. Both the formal, ceremonial head of the Bangkok Court Brahmins (Rajaguru) and a local ethnic Indian complained about professional spirit mediums. In the words of the latter: "There are people in Thailand misusing the name of Hinduism. They say they go into trance. Once there was a conference of two or three hundred of these people. There one person said he was possessed by Ganesha, another said he was possessed by Siva and someone else that he is possessed by Durga. All those who do this are Thai people who claim to be Hindus, but they do all this to make money and to fool people. We have to find a way to stop that. We have to spread the word that Hinduism does not believe in these things" (Malik 2003: 26).



established social and institutional structures of Thai society and culture, in both urban and rural areas, creating new forms of collective association and weakening older, previously dominant institutional actors such as the state.

These general changes were felt within the domain of religiosity as much as in other discrete domains of Thai social life. I have in particular focused on how these broad social changes set the stage and fueled the dynamics of one crucial transformation within Thai Buddhist religiosity: the decline and fragmentation of state-controlled establishment Buddhism and the religious authority and legitimacy associated with it. Institutionally, the declining hegemonic domination of establishment Buddhism within the field of Thai religiosity parallels the generalized, if unevenly felt, decreasing hegemonic domination of the Thai state in all domains of Thai society and culture over recent decades. Due to numerous general social and historical developments, beginning in the 1960s a weakening ecclesiastical hierarchy found itself increasingly unable to successfully exert and impose its social authority upon the wider social environment. Ideologically, the declining hegemonic domination of establishment Buddhism was reflected in the new religious aspirations of Buddhist laity, the less secure religious legitimacy of establishment monks, and the growing appeal of alternative monastic movements and monastic virtuosos on the margins of the mainstream Sangha.

In addition, I have shown how the moral legitimacy, charismatic authority and virtuous authenticity embodied in the Thai Theravada Buddhist concept of *barami* was uncaged from its temporary ideological monopolization by establishment Buddhism and the state-controlled Sangha, allowing it to be appropriated and claimed by other religious specialists. These specialists included professional spirit mediums who were seeking a more prestigious identity and status within the expanding, diversifying landscape of popular religiosity in late-twentieth

century Thailand. Professional spirit mediums historically emerged as a significant type of religious specialist at the very same time that the legitimizing rhetoric of *barami* was spreading more widely across the religious landscape and beyond the boundaries of the official Sangha. Fueled by the mass media and migration, the logic and rhetoric of *barami* as the authorizing source of charismatic authority took root and grew within the emerging subculture of professional spirit mediums that arose in Bangkok.

As a result, professional spirit mediums proudly, loudly and somewhat defiantly laid claim to the legitimizing idea that their possessing deities were supramundane beings of great *barami* and that moreover the work of prognostication, blessing, healing and merit-making that they performed on behalf of those deities was itself the product and sign of *barami*. Thus, rather than representing either irrationality and chicanery as moralizing modernist reformers would claim or backwards customs and folkloric primitivism as establishment state ecclesiastical bureaucrats might assert, professional spirit mediums presented themselves as highly virtuous representatives of Buddhist morality serving to advance highly normative Buddhist goals such as alleviating human suffering and preserving the Buddhist teachings and Sangha.

In this public self-understanding, professional spirit mediums were reinterpreting the cultural value and social significance of possession and mediumship against the grain of how the possession and mediumship was conventionally defined. In this agenda they benefited from the increasing autonomy, freedom and voice granted to a wide array of unconventional religious actors, groups and subcultures in the wake of intensifying urbanization, an expanding civil society, a deepening capitalist transformation, and the relative retreat of the projects of establishment state and modernist reform Buddhism. Professional spirit mediums sought to carve out a position of autonomous religious authority at variance, to differing degrees, with all of

three of the regimes of religious value and religion making at play in twentieth century Thailand.

In this exercise, they were not unique however. Others religious actors on the stage of mainstream popular religiosity also were pursuing a similar strategy of distinction and difference.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **THE SUBCULTURE OF BANGKOK PROFESSIONAL SPIRIT MEDIUMS BETWIXT AND BETWEEN POPULAR AND EMERGENT BUDDHIST RELIGIOSITY**

In response to those broad social changes and the declining institutional and ideological hegemony of establishment and modernist Buddhism documented in the previous chapter, popular Buddhist religiosity flourished and diversified in late-twentieth-century Thailand's more heterogeneous religious environment. Actors, practices, and forms of knowledge and experience long accepted and valued within the field of popular religiosity experienced greater public prestige and appeal as the ability and willingness of Sangha ecclesiastical authorities and state bureaucrats to enforce their standardized vision of official elite Buddhist religiosity declined. At the same time novel, emergent religious actors, practices, and forms of knowledge and experience with more limited cultural histories, geographic reach and social recognition also experienced expanding public prestige and appeal. Professional spirit mediumship – as one of these novel and emergent types of religiosity – benefited as well from a relative decrease in the stigmatization of possession by elite religious and political authorities. Like other practitioners of popular Buddhist religiosity, the status and fortunes of professional spirit mediums generally improved within Thailand's diversifying religious marketplace over the final decades of the twentieth century.

Many of these new and innovative forms of popular religiosity were embedded in new religious associations, movements and subcultures which emerged in response to a reconfigured social landscape transformed by the growing influence of industrialization, democratization and urbanization. These novel forms of religiosity stood in relative opposition to modernist reform

and establishment state Buddhism, yet also often reconceptualized and rearticulated cosmological beliefs, ritual practices, forms of sociality and religious experiences even with regards to the standard interpretations of religiosity within the frame and religious regime of inclusive syncretism. The beliefs and practices of professional spirit mediums both reflect this general ferment, revitalization and reconceptualization within Thai popular religiosity beyond the framing visions of modernist reform, establishment state and inclusive syncretism, and have helped, in turn, to fuel it in ways both direct and indirect.

What remains to be explained, however, is the particular substantive character and social dynamics that define the subculture of Thai professional spirit mediums in relation to the broad-based recent ferment in popular religiosity and in the wake of the century and a half of historical transformations in Thai Buddhist religiosity I have discussed in this dissertation. The rise of a moralizing modernist reform vision and project, the expansion of an establishment Buddhism pursuing civilizing centralization and standardization, the stigmatization of inclusive syncretism as either misguided or backwards, the subsequent decline of establishment Buddhism amidst the broader social turmoil of industrialization, democratization and urbanization, and the efflorescence of novel, alternative forms of religiosity in partial tension with all three regimes of Buddhist value and religion making – these constitute seminal historical developments which have framed and reframed the ideological, social and institutional environment within which Thai spirit possession (as a set of cosmological beliefs and ritual practices) and Thai spirit mediums (as a category of non-monastic religious specialists) in general have carved out a specific domain of cultural meaning and social significance within the field of Thai religiosity more generally at the close of the twentieth century. These historical developments have also profoundly shaped the foundational cultural categories, social dynamics, institutional norms,

organizational contexts, and historical path dependencies which have facilitated and shaped the very emergence of professional spirit mediumship as a novel configuration of religiosity.

Nonetheless, professional spirit mediums constitute just one thread within the more generalized cacophony of innovative and alternative religious forms that seeks to claim an accepted foothold within the legitimizing aura of mainstream Thai Buddhism in what can now be called a Post-Reform, Post-Establishment Buddhist era. And their efforts to position themselves persuasively within this Post-Reform, Post-Establishment Buddhist era share many similarities with some, but not all, of their fellow religious actors, groups and subcultures. And just like the wider milieu of actors, groups and subcultures within the contested domain of popular Thai Buddhism, they have been indelibly shaped by the changing social, political, ideological and institutional fortunes of these three projects of defining Thai Buddhism as a particular regime of religious value and of how different actors, groups and institutions have sought to employ these frames in the pursuit of their own interests and goals. Numerous scholars, in fact, have located spirit possession and spirit mediumship at the heart of a transformed mainstream Thai popular religiosity at the end of the twentieth century (for example, Pattana and Jackson). What exactly defines popular Thai Buddhist religiosity and how professional spirit mediums exemplify its values and characteristics, however, often has not been examined carefully or precisely.

In this chapter I first examine the analytic category of “popular” Thai Buddhism and how various scholars have sought to define it. I then turn to a reflection on how the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums relates to this idea of popular religiosity. I pursue this analysis through a detailed explication of the key cultural characteristics, social relations and processual dynamics that define the subculture as a lived social world, and how as an emergent form of religiosity these both conform to and diverge from their instantiation in the field of

popular religiosity more generally. I then explore how professional spirit mediums are active agents within popular religiosity as well as the ways in which they serve as creative catalysts in the production of novel forms of belief, ritual and meaning that are distributed and employed more broadly outside their subculture but within the general field of popular religiosity. I conclude with some reflections on the subculture of Thai professional mediums as an emergent form of religiosity pursuing a legitimating strategy of religious upgrading (“Buddhaization”) in the wake of the rise of modernist reform and establishment state Buddhism.

### **Rethinking Thai “Popular Buddhism” in the Post-Reform, Post-Establishment Era**

In recent scholarship on spirit possession in contemporary Thailand, and most especially professional spirit possession, there has been a tendency to shift the general analytic frame used to examine and explicate it. While an earlier generation of scholars tended to employ concepts like “folk Buddhism” and “folk religion,” it is now more common to employ the concepts of “popular Buddhism” and “popular religion.”<sup>161</sup> When scholars employ the label of “popular Buddhism” typically they are suggesting at a minimum that the religious phenomenon under consideration is widely distributed geographically and socially, participated in by a large and diverse number of practitioners, and that any even larger number of individuals are knowledgeable and even supportive of it. Generally, these scholars are also in broad agreement about the substantive definition and analytic value of the idea of “popular religion.”

In the broadest sense, their definitions and uses conform with several basic themes that Storey identifies as underpinning the meaning and use of the concept of “popular culture”

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<sup>161</sup> On the use of “folk” in the study of Thai spirit possession, see Attagara (1967), Kirsch (1967), Tambiah (1970), Kirsch (1977), Lando (1983), Irvine (1984), Grow (1992), and Muecke (1992). On the current use of “popular” in the study of Thai spirit possession, see Jackson (1999a), Jackson (1999b), Pattana (2005a), Pattana (2005b), Maud (2007), Horstmann (2009), Ariya (2011), Fukuura (2011), Fukuura (2012), Johnson (2012), Pattana (2012), Horstmann (2013), and Maud (2013).

(Storey 1998). Thus, popular Buddhism is that Buddhism which is widely favored or well liked, which is a form of everyday practice, and which is not representative of elite, high, dominant or official culture. This last characteristic of “popular” has been particularly important in the minds of Thai Buddhist scholars, and is an unrecognized consequence of the foundational manner by which Orientalist and Victorian religion scholarship came to define the essence of Buddhism in general and Theravada Buddhism in particular in the nineteenth century. In the eyes of Oriental and Victorian scholars, Buddhism as an authentic path of religiosity was singularly defined by monks following canonical teachings and praxis in the pursuit of liberation from samsara (Hallisey 1995). Recirculated through Weber’s historical sociology of religions, this idea migrated into most anthropological models and analyses of Theravada Buddhism in the post-war era while maintaining a robust intellectual presence within the religious studies and historical scholarship of the same era (Phibul 2008, Pattana 2009). Consequently, for most scholars of Thai Buddhism, popular Buddhism is a rather negative, residual analytic category. Typically, it is that form of Buddhist belief and practice which is not concerned with soteriology, does not involve or is only poorly reflective of canonical texts, rites, models or interpretations, and either occurs outside the official ecclesiastical order of the monks (the Sangha) or is participated in by non-monastics (or improper monks). Spirit possession and a large variety of other beliefs, practices and actors easily and legitimately fall into the category of “popular” from this perspective and have been interpreted frequently by scholars in this light.

Given the enduring influence of evolutionist and functional scholarly models in the study of religion, the strongly normative association of soteriology, monasticism and canonicity in the fundamental definition of what foundationally defines Buddhism has also unfortunately meant that what is categorized as “popular” also typically gathers a series of additional interpretative



associations as well, even from scholars self-conscious about the potentially distorting historical weight of their intellectual genealogies. Thus, popular Thai Buddhism is far too often glossed as associated with magic, the supernatural and the superstitious, a cultic ethos and sociality, worldly mundane concerns, and an animistic cosmological sensibility associated with the cultural logic of spirit cults. As Chapter 3 of this dissertation sought to explicate, one consequence of these analytic presumptions was that much anthropological analysis of everyday lived Buddhism in rural villages and non-elite sociocultural settings spent considerable time seeking to explicate the normative conformity and interpretive viability of popular Buddhism vis-à-vis the presumed essence of an authentic Buddhism defined by soteriology, monasticism and canonicity. Another consequence was the need to sort out how various otherwise seemingly religious behavior not carried out by monks was either reflective of a “popular Buddhism” of some variant (folk Buddhism, village Buddhism, local Buddhism, heterodox Buddhism) or was not properly part of Buddhism at all. Spirit possession and spirit mediumship easily falls into this category of religious behavior that has to be accounted for by either locating it within the frame of some type of popular Buddhism or outside it in some other complex of non-Buddhist religiosity.

The rising historical efflorescence beginning in the 1960s and 1970s of a popular religiosity first in the shadows and then beyond the boundaries and disciplinary reach of the official, and no longer quite so dominant, ecclesiastical order and its interpretation of the religious life has meant that scholars are increasingly interested in studying, analyzing and interpreting “popular” Thai Buddhism. Non-official, non-elite and doctrinally creative or suspicious forms of Buddhist belief and practice advanced by either non-monastics or heterodox monks is increasingly seen as influential and persuasive in shaping the overall contours of Thai Buddhism as a tradition of cultural meaning and social significance, whether for better or worse.

At the same time, the unfortunate association of popular Buddhism with the magical, the supernatural, the cultic and the worldly has meant that monks providing amulets, blessings and love magic, spirit mediums providing healing, miracles and communication with the divine, and astrologers and palm readers providing divination and techniques for avoiding cosmological misfortune – to name just a few concrete examples – have unrepresentatively but iconically come to stand in for that innovative reimagining of Thai religiosity seen as remaking Thai Buddhism at the end of the twentieth century. For many scholars, therefore, the recent efflorescence of popular Buddhism has the look of a resurgence of magic, supernaturalism and spirit cults, or perhaps of a syncretic heritage that, although temporarily suppressed by the unintended combined influence of modernist reform and establishment state Buddhism, is now returning with renewed vigor.<sup>162</sup>

This interpretation is doubly mistaken, however. First, the ferment within a popular Buddhism on the mundane and worldly, as shaped by non-canonical or doctrinally suspicious ideas and practices, and as either guided by non-monastics or as occurring outside the official Sangha's ecclesiastical reach includes many more actors and groups than simply magical monks, spirit mediums, astrologers and the like. There are independent social organizations and movements composed of monks and laity engaged in moral campaigns to curb and eradicate alcohol consumption, abortion and prostitution or to protect the privileged status of Buddhism as the dominant religion within the Thai nation-state (Katewadee 2012). There are independent associations and networks of activist monks and concerned laity seeking to curb environmental destruction (Isager and Ivarsson 2002 and Darlington 2012) and advance models of sustainable,

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<sup>162</sup> Both Pattana and Jackson make arguments along these lines. Jackson is very explicit in this regard, speaking about how during the 1990s a new religious formation of “prosperity religions accentuated long-established patterns of symbolic syncretism and luck-enhancing protective ritualism” (1999b: 246) and elsewhere about “the post-Cold War resurgence of supernatural religiosity at the edges and outside the institution of the Thai Buddhist Sangha” (2012: 612).

local economic development and agriculture (Pinit 2012). There are professionals informed by Buddhist ideas and values seeking to transform medical and therapeutic challenges such as addiction, the treatment of HIV-AIDS, and the treatment of death (Pataraporn and Taweesak 2013, Kubotani and Engstrom 2005, Sakurai and Sasaki 2014, Stonington 2011), while NGOs focused on community development are seeking to employ Buddhist practices and techniques in local communal self-organization (Wanna 2005 and Okabe 2014). There are self-described lay and monastic masters of efficacious esoteric knowledge who claim to be able to cleanse and purify the inauspicious karmic heritage of individuals tormented by the demeritorious weight of past immoral actions such as abortion (Moodcharoen 2013). And there are a wide variety of religious teachers, both lay and monastic, teaching instruction in vipassana Buddhist meditation to laypeople and renunciants, both Thai and foreign (Cook 2010). There are monks, Brahmins and esoteric masters wading into political conflicts, electoral battles and polarizing ideological warfare about issues of citizenship, democratic representation and civil or human rights (Heikkila-Horn 2010, Cohen 2012).

As these examples reveal, the ferment within a popular Thai Buddhism on the edges and outside the normative institutional, ideological and praxological boundaries of the establishment Sangha is diverse and far exceeds any simple designation of Thai popular Buddhism as centered on the magical, the supernatural, the apotropaic or the cultic. And it is hardly reducible to that exotic mix of magical amulets, divine possession, miraculous healing, intercessional divination and the sacralization of wealth all too often highlighted in commentary about contemporary Thai popular Buddhism.

Second, it is mistaken to interpret the efflorescence of popular Buddhism as primarily the resurgence of a previously repressed syncretic heritage or polytropic sensibility. To a certain

degree there is a measure of truth to this claim. The retreat of establishment state Buddhism as an influential frame of religious value and interpretation, as a significantly salient vision for defining Thai Buddhism, and as a disciplinary social project has enabled various religious actors to more persuasively employ the religious regime of inclusive syncretism as a means to legitimize, order and advance their particular religious beliefs, practices and goals. Nonetheless, as I have sought to show in the case of professional spirit mediums, some of these actors are also transgressively reimagining some of the conventional classificatory logics, cosmological symbolism and social hierarchies in ways that challenge basic principles undergirding inclusive syncretism's project of incorporation, subordination and assimilation.

In addition, some of the generalized ferment in contemporary Thai popular Buddhism also takes inspiration from the visions of modernist reform and even establishment state Buddhism. Those regimes of religious value and religion making have not simply unilaterally retreated much less disappeared from the dynamics of the religious field. The growth of actors, institutions and movements seeking to spread the value of vipassana meditation can, in part, be interpreted as revitalized efforts seeking to renew through a missionary impulse the modernist reform sensibility. Similarly, organizations and groups seeking to defend the privileged position of Buddhism in Thai society by securing its official legal status as the state religion can, in part, be interpreted as a new project seeking to advance religiosity in the frame of establishment state Buddhism.

The general domain of popular religiosity in contemporary Thailand, therefore, displays continuing social projects and agendas by groups and individuals animated by all three of the historical regimes of religious value and religion making that I have identified as salient frames of action across the long history of twentieth century Thailand. At the same time, different

groups and actors draw upon multiple regimes and frames in complex and sometimes even contradictory ways, while other pursue their religious goals and callings along the lines of emergent forms of religiosity that transgressively contest all three of those overarching visions of the proper Thai Buddhist life.

### **The Emergent Thai Buddhist Religiosity of the Subculture of Bangkok Professional Spirit Mediums**

It is noteworthy that several scholars who have recently focused intensely on explicating the cultural character and social dynamics of popular Buddhism (Pattana 2005a, 2005b, 2008, 2012) and popular religiosity (Jackson 1999a, 1999b, 2012) in contemporary Thailand have highlighted the iconic and exemplary salience of spirit possession and mediumship within their historical narratives and scholarly interpretations. Jackson argues that over the course of the 1980s and 1990s in Thailand there emerged a series of discretely focused prosperity religions that moved from the margins to the mainstream and which merged into a loose symbolic complex that sanctified the pursuit of wealth, capitalist market relations and entrepreneurial activity. These Siamese prosperity religions reached back into and valorized animist, folk and royalist Brahmanical, and non-Theravada forms of religiosity. Jackson perceives this new formation of popular religiosity as displacing and marginalizing Buddhist, and especially doctrinal Buddhist, imaginaries as it fuels a boom in a resurgent supernaturalism that could more adequately address the questions of unpredictability, uncertainty, caprice and chance produced by market relations. Spirit mediums and possession are, for Jackson, one example of the type of religious behavior caught up within these generalized prosperity religions.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> In his early discussion of prosperity religion spirit mediumship plays a notable role in two of the three ritual complexes he examines as evidence of these prosperity religions (Jackson 1999b). In his later discussion of

Pattana even more centrally locates spirit mediumship at the center of his analysis of contemporary popular Thai Buddhism in the 1990s. Spirit mediums and magical monks are the two central and recurring religious actors he examines in his various studies of the dynamically changing beliefs and practices, forms and functions of an everyday, hybrid Buddhism concerned with securing mundane and this-worldly benefits. Similar to Jackson, he sees the market and the mass media as having fueled a popular occult economy of prosperity religions centered around deified and miraculously potent supramundane entities rendered ritually accessible for blessings, sanctification and protection. Also like Jackson, he emphasizes the magical and supernaturalist character of these ideas, their opposition to doctrinalist and state visions of Buddhism, and their reliance upon a range of non-Buddhist or folk Buddhist symbolic registers. Pattana, however, explicitly identifies the experience of possession as foundational to the charismatic authority of both spirit mediums (possessed by virtuous gods) and magical monks (possessed by a virtuous dharmic essence) in his detailed ethnographic analyses.<sup>164</sup>

Both Jackson and Pattana helpfully point to a variety of cultural characteristics, social dynamics and religious idioms that centrally define the subculture of professional spirit mediums. To the degree that each employs them as examples of more general trends in contemporary popular Thai Buddhism, however, their perspectives are somewhat limited and fragmentary. In contrast I would now like to turn to a more comprehensive and detailed discussion of various centrally defining cultural and social characteristics of the subculture on its own terms. Thus, rather than examining professional spirit mediums as a reflection of a larger religious complex or set of general trends, I will examine the subculture on its own terms looking

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prosperity religion, Jackson explicitly locates the chronologically parallel resurgence in Thai spirit mediumship within the logic of prosperity religions and the symbolic complex crystallizing out of it (Jackson 2012).

<sup>164</sup> Pattana also consistently highlights parallels and similarities between spirit mediums, magic monks and other religious actors regarding their social relations, therapeutic services, symbolic forms and ritual techniques. See especially Pattana (2012).

rather for what illumination it can cast on the shape, form and dynamics of popular religiosity. The goal therefore is to look out at the field of post-Reform, post-Establishment Thai popular religiosity from the perspective of the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums. In the process, various general characteristics of popular religiosity only hinted at by Jackson and Pattana will become more evident, even as the subculture itself will be shown to be putting its own interpretive and performative twist on general experiences, ideas, practices and dimensions of popular religiosity in circulation more broadly beyond the boundaries of the subculture itself. In the process, the nuanced trafficking between emergent and popular Buddhist religiosity within contemporary Thailand also will be illuminated.<sup>165</sup>

*Possession, trance and ecstasy.* To a considerable degree, although not exclusively, the lives of Bangkok professional spirit mediums and those associated with them or who turn to them for assistance is foundationally centered around the act and experience of possession. Professional spirit medium, their clients and their followers assert that it is august lords (*jao*) and virtuous gods (*thep*) who possess individuals within the subculture, not amoral, mischievous or

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<sup>165</sup> A comprehensive sociocultural description and analysis of contemporary Thai popular religiosity would comparatively examine a diverse series of exemplary representative forms across a broad range of basic but general features and dimensions: cosmology and beliefs; ritual practices and techniques; types of specialized knowledge employed and methods of transmission; orientation to the sacred and forms of supramundane potency mediated and accessed; social organization of participants and the ethos and techniques for delivering services; social forms, dynamics, and patterns of interaction between leaders, followers, assistants and clients; moral, pragmatic, social and existential concerns and problems addressed and resolved through participation; relative public legitimacy; relations with other specialists and actors in the religious field; relation to important actors and institutions within the field of religion such as monks and Brahmins or the Sangha, Chinese shrines and Hindu temples; and relations with significant social sectors and dominant institutions in state, market and civil society beyond the religious field, such as the military, the business community, state bureaucrats, the judiciary, mass media; the culture industries, and scholars and academic institutions, to name just a few examples. In addition, a more nuanced historical and contextual description and analysis of popular religiosity would holistically and dialectically examine changes in these features across various historical eras as well as differences between different regions of Thailand. Currently, however, no such comprehensive compilation or analysis of these analytic dimensions exists. Instead, archival information is difficult to obtain and synchronic accounts are scattered across dozens of monographs and essays such that no larger, holistic, historical and contextualized account of Thai popular religiosity currently exists. Those elements symbolically and socially associated with either the Sangha or Buddhist monks is typically much better documented and contextualized than is the case with non-monastic specialists. What follows is a synoptic attempt to provide a concise snapshot of these basic but general dimensions with regards to the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums, but only from a synchronic frame. Diachronic and spatial variability are ignored.

malevolent supramundane entities also perceived as possessing individuals within Thai religious culture. Domesticated and mature possession is understood as a divine calling indexing a virtuous karmic heritage and status rather than an affliction. Acts of possession by mature and competent mediums are understood either as occasions planned and voluntarily chosen by the medium or as unexpected demands instigated by a *jao* or *thep*.

The normative phenomenological experience of possession involves a trance-like state characterized by the loss of consciousness and memory, and the full displacement of agency and control, although variations large and small on these basic expectations are present within the subculture. Metaphors of fainting, falling asleep and forgetting oneself are often employed to describe a normative trance experience. Discernible and radical changes in persona, speech, and bodily comportment approximating a variety of both general and specific mythic and historical personas are conventionally displayed in the public presentation of the possessed self within the subculture. The displacement of consciousness and agency vis-à-vis trance possession is retrospectively characterized as unpleasant, disorienting and exhausting for the medium. Nonetheless, an undercurrent and aura of rapturous delight and blissful joy can be evoked by the act and experience of possession. This can be true for both the medium as well as those witnessing the possession or interacting with the descended lords and gods.

*Dialogic communication with morally virtuous supramundane entities.* These *jao* and *thep* as supramundane agencies are understood to be moral and virtuous in a conventional Buddhist sense, and they are typically sub-categorized as either Thai, Chinese or Indian in disposition. They are esteemed figures within the Buddhist cosmological pantheon, endowed with vast stores of religious merit (*bun*) and virtuous perfection (*barami*). They are understood to be descending from the heavens to protect Buddhism, to assist a suffering humanity, and to



further increase their own store of *bun barami* as they pursue their own karmic progress and future soteriological liberation. Such entities are typically perceived as generous, benevolent, compassionate, and wise, as well as demanding, stern, and capricious. It is conventional in many if not most Buddhist ceremonies to ritually invite the gods down to witness meritorious activities in order to both assist them in their karmic progress and to obtain their blessing and protection. In contrast however to their usual mute and spectral presence as witnesses on these ceremonial occasions, the descents of the possessing gods in the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums is characterized by not only their active, directed and more transparent communication but the dialogic nature of this communication and interaction.

Sustained dialogic communication within any given ritual occasion and across a series of reiterative moments is at the heart of the social life of the subculture. In the process, divine beings from the moral heights of the pantheon progressively take on the cultural form of distinct, fully-rounded personalities with unique histories of interaction, intentionality and desire displayed in turn through a variety of enduring and idiosyncratic social relations with a spectrum of mediums, clients, and followers. The subculture thus constitutes the one domain within Thai popular religiosity in which *jao* and *thep* emerge into religious life as full spectrum, intersubjectively realized cultural agents, identities and actors in a dialogic vein.

Siriporn, for example, was a loyal disciple of Chuchat, a medium of Ganesh. Over the course of several months I observed a sustained dialogue between Siriporn and Ganesh regarding her struggles with her coworkers at her job and her frustrations with her husband and children. The conversation occurred in fragmented, segmented installments during multiple private and public consultations via the medium, while also incorporating dreams and signs arising in between consultations that Siriporn interpreted as, and the medium confirmed were,

communication with Ganesh. While Chuchat was possessed by other *thep* as well, Siriporn only discussed her concerns with Ganesh and waited impatiently for him to descend into the world when visiting Chuchat. Ganesh, in turn, affectionately revisited Siriporn's troubles whenever she was present and implored her to inform him of the latest developments in her woes. Ganesh's sustained concern brought Siriporn emotional relief despite no enduring resolution to her specific problems, while other members of Chuchat's entourage commented on, and speculated about the karmic causes of, their seemingly special shared bond.

*Supramundane potency, both moral and amoral.* As morally virtuous and excellent beings within the pantheon, *jao* and *thep* possess a variety of supramundane potencies which are channeled through their human mediums for the benefits of those individuals seeking them out as well as humanity in general. This supramundane power and potency is described through a variety of idioms, and all of these modalities of supramundane potency are understood as productive of auspicious and miraculous consequences.

There is *saksit* potency, a derivative of any supramundane status, which is potentially benevolent and protective although not necessarily so, and which is typically accessed through a cultural logic of supplication, paying respect, propitiation and vow-making. There is *itthirit* potency seen as arising from the successful practice of more advanced levels of concentration mediation in which such esteemed and august entities are presumed to be accomplished and which is loosely but not definitively associated with the moral authority of Buddhist liberating soteriological insight. There is potency in the form of *bunyarit*, a supramundane efficacy understood to flow from the performance of auspicious and morally proper deeds in conformity with Buddhist values and virtues. Those actions performed by possessed spirit mediums in the course of providing protection, blessings or healing and perceived as indexing conventional

Buddhist moral perfections, such as generosity, devotion, sacrifice, and patience are typically interpreted through the frame of *bunyarit*. Lastly, there is potency as *aphinihan*, the culminating extraordinary quality of moral excellence seen as flowing from the vast store of accumulated karmic merit resulting from an innumerable number of virtuous and meritorious acts performed over a vast number of lifetimes. As an almost sublime aura of supramundane power, potency and efficacy reflective of the *bun barami* of those rare beings most accomplished in the pursuit of liberation, it typically is employed when indexing greatly consequential and widely recognized acts of an unexpectedly beneficial nature. The progression from *saksit* to *aphinihan* is a scale of increasing virtue, potency, efficacy and rarity within the Thai Buddhist cosmological order. *Jao* and *thep* as occupants of the cosmological heights are more disposed than many other supramundane entities to embody and deploy those upper scales of the hierarchy of potency.

*Devotionalism.* As emotionally complex personalities who are immediate, living psychosocial presences within daily life, *jao* and *thep* are conceptualized within the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums as righteous and virtuous beings of benevolence and mercy who provide intimate and personal care, guidance, protection and consolation to their devoted servants and as perpetually looking out for their personal benefit as well. As a consequence, the subculture is characterized by an ethos and practice of devotionalism which valorizes as normative the cultivation of deep and abiding relations of commitment, loyalty, trust and concern in a triangulated fashion between *jao* and *thep*, mediums and the members of their entourages. Mediums understand themselves to be the devoted servants of *jao* and *thep*, while entourage members – most especially followers (*luklan* or *lukliang*) and disciples (*luksit*) more than believers (*khon nap thuea*) and clients (*luk kha*) – are also encouraged to take up the role of devoted servant as well. As envisioned within the subculture, the natural and normative response

to this unsolicited and graciously provided benevolent supramundane protection and care is an attitude of reliance upon, trust in and a seeking out of supramundane guidance, the practice of veneration, homage, worship, and service vis-à-vis that supramundane guidance, and a moral subjectivity of grateful submission, dependency and acknowledgment of such guidance. These attitudes, practices and moral orientation, when fused with the social reality through acts of possession of enduring and extended social relations with rounded psychosocial yet miraculous presences, results in a subculture that highly values devotional intimacy as a primary schema for interpersonal social relations and interaction.

Within the subculture *jao* and *thep* become the primary objects of spiritual refuge (*thi phueng*), and seeking a source of supramundane refuge is often perceived by Thais as a typical, excepted and legitimate motivation for those seeking out assistance in the domain of popular religiosity. *Jao* and *thep* constitute the central axis of benevolent and embracing refuge and protection for mediums, the members of their entourages, unaffiliated clients and anonymous but curious members of the general public who investigate the subculture. As virtuous vessels and representatives of the *jao* and *thep*, however, professional spirit mediums can also become secondary and refracted foci of refuge – and by extension devotional intimacy as well – for entourage members, clients and the general public.

Nonetheless, this devotional intimacy and the submission, deference and service it entails is typically much more provisional and ambivalent when extended to professional spirit mediums, except perhaps in the case of the most committed members of an entourage, disciples. Because professional mediums are ontologically distinct from *jao* and *thep*, their personal status as paragons of virtue, benevolence and care is punctuated, provisional and reversible in comparison with *jao* and *thep*. Although entourage members and clients are predisposed to read

the behavior of mediums outside of possession as emblematic of virtue, benevolence and care, especially when that behavior conforms with general expectations about the performance of those qualities, they are also capable of recognizing the all-too-human and less than divine motivations and actions of mediums as struggling servants of the gods. Devotional intimacy displayed towards professional spirit mediums as mediums, therefore, is by nature provisional and reversible within the subculture, and mediums expend considerable social and emotional work in an effort to secure it as much as possible.<sup>166</sup>

Thus, it was not terribly surprising when one day Chotima, the principal live-in assistant of Sam, a medium of Jao Mae Kuan Im, and Pong, a medium of Jao Mae Umathewi, expressed an ambivalent mix of critical feelings about Sam and Pong when no one else was around the abode (*tamnak*). Older than both of them, Chotima described them as occasional naughty children who required her indulgence. In their daily lives, Sam was easily agitated, prone to fits of anger and sometimes sharp-tongued, while Pong was frequently indolent, irresponsible and somewhat selfish. Consequently, she confessed that she liked and respected Pong less than Sam. Nonetheless, she saw it as her job to help them both grow up and mature, and so she forgave them their faults. Moreover, she had dedicated herself long ago to serve Jao Mae Kuan Im and Umathewi, and therefore she perceived this indulgence as a necessary sacrifice in the pursuit of that larger good. As she expressed it, “I can put up with their behavior because I am doing it for Jao Mae.” Quite literally, in fact, she spoke of having dedicated her bodily energy and physical

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<sup>166</sup> Pattana (2012: 119-120) briefly examines devotional intimacy and new forms of religious piety within contemporary popular Buddhism. Jackson (1999b: 251-254) explicitly refers to personality-based devotionalism as a crucial characteristics defining Thai religious populism and notes that devotional religiosity is an important element of popular religiosity which has received little attention in the study of Thai Buddhism. He argues for the explicit study and thematization of devotionalism as part of a historical study of waves of religious populism and their intersection with the rise and fall of personality-based devotional movements. Jackson however has little to say about the social organization of this devotionalism, its underlying cultural practices and techniques, or its performative enactment. He also explicitly envisions this devotionalism as syncretic in character and increasingly reflective of a post-Buddhist religious frame, arguments which I disagree with both substantively and analytically.

vitality to these gods. This brought her consolation and peace of mind amidst petty mundane frustrations.

*Esotericism.* As ideology, ritual practice and ethos, the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums endorses the concept of a secret, sacrally-empowering knowledge (*wicha*) that requires ritual initiation into a lineage of teachers, submission before an immediate personal master who initiates oral transmission to his disciples, and the efficacious activation of such esoteric knowledge through the use of secret ritual techniques and sacred languages. Many of the forms of supramundane knowledge and ritual techniques that professional spirit mediums claim they are proficient in are conventionally understood as esoteric in nature. In addition, the idea of the esoteric also informs how the entourages of professional spirit mediums are socially organized, subtly shaping not only the relations within the abodes between mediums, followers and clients but also the relations between members of the abode and those who are seen as outsiders to it.

The subculture of contemporary Thai professional spirit mediums proudly displays many of the most obvious social markers of esotericism in its social organization, ritual life and everyday activities. Entry into the life of an entourage and a potential career of mediumship is strictly guarded and regulated, at least presumptively, through the necessity of undergoing initiation via the *rap khan* ('receiving the tray') ceremony. According to the subculture, it is only through such a ritual initiation, mediated by a senior, accomplished medium, that a person can formally confirm and acknowledge his or her abiding, devotional relationship with possessing *jao* and *thep*. Furthermore, each initiate is expected to reconfirm his or her enduring asymmetric relationship with both *jao* and *thep* and the senior medium-cum-esoteric teacher through participation in an annual *wai khru* ("paying homage to the teacher") ceremony. In addition, even

publicly open ritual events, like daily consultations with *jao* and *thep* and the annual *wai khru* ceremony, reinscribe and reinforce an aura and ethos of secrecy and esotericism within the subculture. In all of these moments, conventional performative rhetorics of hidden secret knowledge, deferred revelation, regulated and progressive access to hierarchies of secrecy, and the cultivation of obscurity and obliqueness are frequently observable within the subculture.

This practice and ethos of esotericism is most explicitly thematized and reproduced during the central and dominant ritual activity of any medium and entourage: the annual *wai khru* ceremony. Ideologically and socially, the ritual both foundationally grounds and creatively refashions hierarchical relations of esoteric pedagogic instruction. Over the course of the multi-day ceremony, a series of rituals first constitute the host medium as a properly devout, virtuously blessed and legitimately potent student of a range of esoterically empowered teachers. Subsequently, through numerous acts of submissive deference by the host medium's entourage of followers and disciples, the *wai khru* ritually reconstitutes the host medium as an empowered esoteric teacher in his or her own right. In such a fashion the *wai khru* literally enacts as an embodied, social reality the cultural logic of lineage-based esoteric hierarchical authority and the transmission of esoteric religious knowledge.

This valorization and use of the idiom of esotericism by the subculture conforms in its broad contours with the value and practice of esotericism in Thai popular religiosity in general. This model of esoteric knowledge, instruction, transmission and use is valorized and seen as legitimate both inside and outside the Buddhist Sangha. Thus, monks and laity who are experts in astrology, divination, alchemy, tattooing, and the making of charms and amulets similarly employ the idiom of esotericism (Golomb 1985). It also can be perceived as an authorizing rhetoric present among the lineages of ascetic, forest monk meditation masters (Taylor 1993a),

as well as aesthetic, religious and pragmatic arts ranging from musicians, dancers and artists, folk and court Brahmanical authorities, and purveyors of alternative or traditional healing practices (Golomb 1985, Wong 2001, Priyawat 1990).

*Buddhist virtue and practice in a conventional idiom.* Bangkok professional spirit mediums, both in and out of possession, spend considerable time and effort instructing their clients, followers and disciples in the necessity of conventional Buddhist values and virtues and the benefits of conventional Buddhist meritorious activities. They also spend considerable time, labor and financial resources in performatively exemplifying such values and virtues and in organizing conventional meritorious ritual activities. Thus, the daily, weekly and monthly lives of mediums, and their clients and followers, are interspersed with making Buddhist merit in a range of conventional ways. For example, mediums are prolific and perpetual in their donations and offering to monks and the Sangha in various forms (offering alms, financing forest robe donation ceremonies, donating to or organizing themselves the building of religious structures, etc.). They also engage in acts of philanthropic charity and assistance that are similarly seen as the properly virtuous behavior of moral and meritorious religious virtuosos.

In addition, chanting (*suat mon*) conventional Buddhist scriptures is a common suggested activity for clients, sessions of such chanting are prominently featured in the daily and weekly ritual activities of a medium's entourage, and specialized chanting troupes are sometimes hired to participate on special ritual occasions in the subculture. Similarly, prayers (*athithan*), vow-making (*bon ban*) and the acquisition and veneration of sacral objects such as amulets, statuary and regalia are also frequent activities either prescribed to clients as morally beneficial or enjoined upon followers as directives from *jao* and *thep*. In all of these valorized and prescribed activities, the subculture of professional spirit mediums broadly conforms to those general ideas,



expectations and techniques of cultivating Buddhist piety found broadly across the Thai religious landscape, in both its popular and elite configurations.

It was not surprising, therefore, when much of the activity at the abode of Tui on the birthday of Jao Mae Kuan Im was occupied with devotional chanting. While consultations were offered to clients in the afternoon as well, the first round of prayers, offerings and chanting lasting for more than an hour began at 6:00am and included family members and devoted disciples (*luksit*) of the medium. A second round lasting for only 30 minutes followed at 9:00am, while individual entourage members and the medium herself engaged in solitary extended moments of chanting and praying throughout the rest of the morning and afternoon. In the late afternoon after all of the day's clients had been received, a Chinese prayer chanting troupe of twelve middle-aged women arrived at the abode and proceeded to set up a complicated arrangement of offerings before the abode's main altar. Joined in by Tui and her entourage initially, the troupe then led everyone in a three hour long ceremony of chanting, broken only once for some brief refreshments. Tui makes it clear to me several times during the day that full-hearted and devoted acts of merit-making such as this are the expected and required work of mediums when faithfully honoring their *cao* and *thep*.

*Apotropaic needs and miraculous resolutions; karmic uncertainty and meritorious interventions.* Many of the explicit personal concerns raised by the clients who seek out and the followers who are devoted to professional spirit mediums, and the *jao* and *thep* who possess them, revolve around mundane, worldly concerns. Thus in the broadest terms, individuals seek supramundane assistance that will secure or improve within this lifetime their security and protection, their well-being and happiness, their prosperity and success, or their fate and destiny. These general existential concerns are approached and framed through more specific modalities

such as reduced affliction and uncertainty, enhanced health and pleasure, increasing wealth and social prestige, or improved luck and auspiciousness. And these existential concerns are often given concrete cultural and social shape with regards to a specific set of challenges, uncertainties or risks involving effectively meeting one's domestic, familial, occupational and other social responsibilities, goals or desires. Professional spirit mediums are seen as providing either direct blessings, healings, and prognostications – or access to efficacious and powerful techniques – that will secure such ends. When such ends are achieved against seemingly unlikely odds, these achievements are spoken of as miraculous (*pathihan*). Within the subculture, such auspiciousness is spoken of in the common language of success (*khwam samret*), progress (*khwam jaroen*), and happiness and contentment (*khwam suk sabai*) found all across the Thai Buddhist religious landscape as the normatively valued and legitimate goal of worldly interventions.

In exploring and resolving mundane and worldly dilemmas, moreover, the state of a client or follower's generally uncertain karmic heritage and status can frequently arise as a subject of concern. If an individual is diagnosed as having a hidden but enduring karmic tie across lifetimes with the possessing *jao* or *thep*, then a particular medium can be perceived as especially insightful regarding the complicated karmic heritage that lies behind a client or follower's particular current circumstances. Thus, professional spirit mediums by means of the foresight and wisdom of the *jao* and *thep* that possess them can provide a modicum of clarity about the past karmic fortunes and future karmic propensities of those individuals who seek them out. In response, they offer advice about particular strategies to pursue in order to advantageously improve one's karmic balance and chances of a better future rebirth. In this advice they make recourse to a variety of relatively conventional and widespread forms of merit-

making endorsed and practiced broadly across the Thai Buddhist religious field beyond the boundaries of the subculture.

The omnipresence of “miracles” in the life of a medium was on clear display during efforts one day by Noi to manage a merit-making ritual. The donation to a local monastery had been rather impetuously planned and advertised, and yet on that day many followers and clients spontaneously arrived at Noi’s abode and agreed to take part in the ritual. This was not the only “miracle” revealing the blessing of the gods. The rain that had threatened to fall did not despite the consistently overcast sky, the typically wretched traffic jams on the road to the temple did not materialize, and some unexpected monastic visitors to the temple increased the number of monks who received the offerings and blessed the medium and her entourage. In Noi’s opinion all of these turns of good luck were “miraculous” turns of event, and she and her entourage commented on these proofs of blessing repeatedly in the following days and weeks to clients and entourage members alike.

*Cultural religious infrastructure and resources of a distributed nature.* A great deal of the conversations and discourses circulating within the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums – between mediums, disciples, followers, believers and clients – takes the form of biographies and hagiographies, narratives of virtuosity and miracles, and exemplary tales of sacrifice, service, devotion, faith, renunciation, generosity and benevolence. The protagonists of these tales range from *jao* or *thep* themselves, either in the mythic and historical past or the recent contemporary present, to all the other actors involved in the subculture including clients. Not surprisingly however, biographies, narratives and tales about virtuous possessing gods and virtuously serving mediums are more common and more elaborated upon, both orally and through print media. These authorizing accounts of religious authenticity, power and legitimacy

display rhetorical and narrative techniques found within similar narrative genres created and circulated outside the subculture in contemporary popular and elite Thai Buddhism more generally.

In addition, the social environments and ritual practices of the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums are densely populated with an almost baroque material culture of aesthetic forms, shrine altars, religious statuary, ceremonial attire, ritual regalia and sacred implements, both mobile and immobile. Mediums spend considerable time and effort seeking out and discriminating between more or less beautiful, potent, pure or appropriate exemplars of these material and ceremonial accoutrements of the properly devoted life of serving their august lords and virtuous gods. And they spend considerable money in their acquisition. Moreover, they typically both gift and sell auspicious forms of these items to clients, believers, followers and disciples as their respective circumstances require. Or mediums donate them to anonymous strangers, temples and other representatives of the general public. Again, however, the general aesthetic and symbolic character of the forms that these objects take is broadly identical to the forms they take when in circulation outside the subculture, in part because they are purchased in the general marketplace of religious goods.

Consequently, it was rather common for trips with professional spirit mediums to become, in part, essentially extended shopping expeditions in search of auspicious and potent additions to their abodes. While returning to Bangkok from upcountry once with Sam and Pong, for example, the drive stretched out for an additional four or five hours as they continued to stop at a variety of venues, ranging from temples and craft shops, to private workshops and department stores, that promised auspicious or beautiful finds. They did not share my frustration with wasted time, however, as they languidly examined, queried and bargained over a range of

purchases. By the end of the long day, they had purchased large wooden statues of charging bulls and elephant heads, ivory decorated ritual daggers, a statue of a monastic saint, and some paintings of famous Thai reliquary temples – all destined to adorn and “brighten up” the atmosphere of their Bangkok abode.

In fact, while few of the material objects but most of the hagiographies, narratives and tales are self-produced within the subculture, typically those objects and discourses that are the most influential, persuasive and authoritative in their legitimating effects are those produced by third parties. This dynamic is especially true for third parties not directly associated with the subculture, such as journalists and bureaucrats or monks, Brahmins or other valorized, independent but esteemed religious authorities. This social logic of authorization and legitimization is also found more generally within the religious life of other exemplary religious virtuosos, shrines, statues and religious projects within popular Thai Buddhism. Often it is the production, circulation and acquisition of third-party narratives about and third-party material culture representations of particular supramundane entities or religious virtuosos which signals their relative ascent within the competitive circuits of religious potency and power that define popular Thai Buddhism.

*Cultural bricolage across porous boundaries and unbounded networks.* Although repeatedly and insistently framing and defining their activities and goals as principally and even conventionally Buddhist, Bangkok professional spirit mediums are also profoundly promiscuous in their deployment of ritual, symbolic and religious registers that exceed the more conventional boundaries of Thai Theravada Buddhism as understood by the religious regimes of modernist reform, establishment state and even conventional inclusive syncretic Buddhism. In this sense they pragmatically employ a strategy of bricolage in relation to religious difference more in

accordance with a “polytropic” sensibility in which there is an eclectic and fluid reaching out to a variety of different sacral sources of potency as long as they are seen as authoritative in situationally specific and pragmatically select contexts (Carrithers 2000). Thus with regards to ritual forms and practices, ceremonial objects and regalia, divine personages and supramundane benefactors, legitimizing religious authorities and social allies, or symbolic registers and sectarian frames, Bangkok professional spirit mediums push beyond many conventional religious, ethnic and national boundaries. Like many other actors and institutions within the domain of Thai popular religiosity, mediums easily and unselfconsciously selectively seek to appropriate ritual practices, religious objects, and symbolic styles seen as originating within the Buddhist Sangha, elite Brahmanism, folk Brahmanism and even royalist ceremonialism when appropriate. These sources have a natural, taken for granted and self-authorizing aura of sacral legitimacy within the field of contemporary Thai Buddhism almost regardless of whether one’s interpretive point of reference is modernist reform, establishment state or inclusive syncretic Buddhism. Accordingly, Bangkok professional spirit mediums are also actively and positively receptive to securing the allegiance and support of authoritative individuals from within those domains as well in order to buttress their status and prestige.

In addition however, in the pursuit of similar ends mediums can also turn to the ethnic Indian and Chinese communities and their religious worlds as well as non-Thai ethnically distinct Buddhist communities and their religious worlds. This strategy is true whether these communities and religious worlds are located within easy reach inside Thai national borders or at a distance further afield in other countries in Southeast, South and East Asia requiring more complicated pilgrimages. Driven by their deeply personal identification with divinities conventionally categorized in the contemporary world as Hindu, Chinese and Mahayana in

nature, professional mediums can also frequently feel comfortable reaching into these alternative religious sensibilities without trying to assimilate or domesticate sectarian difference within a Theravada frame of understanding. As a result, they can in turn comment disparagingly on what they see as the more provincial perspectives and attitudes exhibited by conventional Thai Theravada Buddhist monastic renunciants or laypersons. In all of these ways, a finely tuned sensitivity to the competitive appeal of the novel within a robustly cacophonous field of popular religiosity can predispose some professional mediums towards a promiscuous receptivity to religious forms that they perceive as safely, yet not quite transgressively, unusual and different.

Thus, Suwit, a medium of Chulalongkorn, was very proud of his trips to holy sites, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, in Singapore, Hong Kong and mainland China. He recounted these “pilgrimages” to followers, clients and enquiring visitors alike, and several large framed photos of him with his accompanying loyal disciples (*luksit*) at some of the places he visited adorned the walls of his abode as evidence of his good fortune, devoted service and financial success. Sam, a medium of Jao Mae Kuan Im, was proud of his travels to India, mainland China and Singapore as well. He also had documented his religious trips abroad with photos which were gathered in a compact photo album that sat in the entryway to his abode as well as printed in mass media advertisements in which he sought out additional financial support for his various meritorious building projects. Sam also was very proud of the “Tibetan” styled Buddha statue he acquired while abroad and was quick to point out to clients and other potential donors that the Jao Mae Kuan Im statue he was building in the south of Thailand had a subtly Tibetan-themed aesthetic that the average Thai person might not appreciate. Boom, a medium of Kali, on the other hand, would occasionally complain that most Thais didn’t understand Hinduism and were generally ignorant of the mythology and auspiciousness of Kali despite her great spiritual importance.

*Entourages centered around virtuoso leaders.* The foundational social unit of the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums is an entourage of clients, believers, followers and disciples organized around a single medium as its virtuoso leader. The social relations within these entourages are often dyadic in nature and structured broadly according to a social logic of patronage interpreted through a cultural idiom of moral, personal and karmic indebtedness, fostering a diffuse form of triangulated obligatory reciprocity between *jao* or *thep*, spirit medium, and the disciples, followers, believers, and clients within the extended entourage. Accordingly, there can be considerable variability in the degree of commitment, loyalty, deference and identification binding various individuals to the medium and the entourage in general.

Not surprisingly, the membership within an entourage can fluctuate considerably as well, both in terms of absolute numbers and in terms of the particular individuals occupying the roles of disciples, followers, believers and clients within the entourage. The boundaries of any given entourage are porous with individuals easily moving back and forth between them, and with weak barriers to either entry or exit at the level of clients and believers. Especially for clients and believers there is limited sense of exclusive affiliation with any particular medium or entourage, whereas for followers and disciples there is increasing pressure towards exclusive participation with a single entourage and devotional identification with the medium at the center of that entourage. However, even some followers can resist exclusive identification and can maintain participation as a follower in multiple entourages, whereas disciples find such pluralistic commitment very difficult. Typically, it is only at the level of followers and disciples that the entourage becomes socially defined less exclusively by dyadic ties with the medium as virtuoso



leader and instead is supplemented by social ties to other entourage members and an incipient collective identity as a group with a shared group identity.

Consequently, Bangkok professional spirit mediums spend considerable time and energy in the cultural and emotional work required to transform clients and believers into followers and disciples, association into membership, and diffusely committed occasional participation into exclusively committed regular participation. Much of their mundane, day to day and backstage activities – outside of formal rituals of possession or when coordinating the religious affairs and projects of the devoted service to *jao* and *thep* – consists of the work of managing entourages and fostering social relations which rely less on a transactional logic of restricted exchange and more on an identificatory logic of generalized exchange. Whereas idioms of vow taking as a discrete transactional exchange predominates in relations between mediums and clients or believers, idioms of diffuse moral indebtedness and identification predominate in relations between mediums and followers or disciples. The social life of an entourage subtly reinforces this division between clients and believers and followers and disciples, as well as the social drive to turn the former into the latter, through the organization of its social space, its divisions of social labor, and the reiterated structure and devotional nature of organized entourage activities in private and public spaces beyond key ritual events oriented in principle towards a generic, anonymous public.

These entourage social dynamics were clearly evident at the abode of Noi. The outer, open air patio was designated for clients and anonymous visitors, while the inside shrine room and kitchen of the house were freely accessible to followers and disciples. Not infrequently, Noi consciously policed this divide, instructing her followers and disciples to close the patio door and draw its curtain or to shush outside visitors who wandered inside on their own. These followers

and disciples served as ritual assistants as well during consultations between clients and *thep*, a responsibility they voluntarily and happily took upon themselves as partial compensation for all of the assistance, care and protection they had received from the gods that possessed Noi. While Noi when possessed was busy formally and briskly responding to the needs of a constant stream of clients and visitors, her loyal disciples worked to not only explain to newcomers exactly how to ceremonially interact with *cao* and *thep*, they also provided those same visitors afterwards with elaborate, extended clarifications of the advice and requests made of them by the *cao* and *thep* during their consultations. Through such care and attention, Noi's disciples – sometimes wearing t-shirts with the abodes name and address on it – were simultaneously serving their supramundane protectors and helping to turn clients into regular visitors and even perhaps followers or disciples themselves someday.

*Networked collective identity and informal, shifting associations.* Although much of the social and emotional life of the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums is organized and made meaningful at the level of the entourage, and the dyadic or collective social relations constituting that entourage, the subculture is also structured through an important supra-entourage dimension of social embedding. Lineage relations of master-student esotericism propel mediums, and by implication their entourages, into relations with other mediums and their entourages. Annual *wai khru* ('paying homage to the teacher') ceremonies require mediums to foster social relations with other mediums (and their affiliated entourages) that extend further than the reach of their own personal entourage and particularized lineages of esoteric empowerment. Participation in public ritual events outside the subculture proper but in the domain of popular religiosity – such as festivals at Hindu and Chinese temples or Brahmanical ceremonies, for example – propels mediums and their entourages into more or less frequent

interactions with other spirit mediums and their entourages, as well as other religious virtuosos and authorities, in social milieus beyond the control of the subculture.

The result is that the subculture of professional spirit mediums ultimately has a networked, diffuse and distributed nature as a total field of encompassing and defining concrete social relations. Beyond the boundaries of entourages and esoteric lineages, however, these social relations can be quite fluid in their character, focus and intensity, producing at best weak ties of solidarity that can be easily ignored, denied or broken when necessary. The entourages of mediums never scale up and cohere as bounded, enduring forms of solidarity at a more encompassing collective level of social organization beyond the level of entourages. At best there are ultimately temporary and provisional relations of association, camaraderie and assistance between different mediums and their entourages, relations which never take on an enduring or self-consciously collective modality of social identification and which are always reversible and revisable in principle.

*Non-institutionalized religious identity and authority.* Given the exclusively entourage and networked foundations of social relations within the subculture, there is no shared formal or even informal adjudication of membership, status, rank or propriety within the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums. There exist no formal institutions or organizations for the training and socialization of mediums. There exist no formalized criteria of entry, progress, or exit for mediums which is either shared across all participants in the subculture or which can be employed to standardize, regulate, discipline or structure the activities, behavior or claims of participants within the subculture. There exist no formal codes of conduct or comportment and no formal manuals of behavior and practice which can be used to discipline, mold or direct the actions of mediums. There exist no formal scriptural canons, cosmological beliefs, or ritual

scripts that would foster a relatively standardized and uniform set of ideological beliefs, ritual performances or cultural models of action more generally within the subculture. And there exist no hierarchy of formal authorities who could enforce any shared standards of belief and practice or formally discipline and regulate the members of the subculture. In all of these senses then, the subculture is profoundly non-institutionalized, and therefore the dominant modality of religious authority within the subculture is overwhelmingly charismatic rather than legal or even traditional in a Weberian sense.

Consequently, religious authority within the subculture is profoundly volatile, contested and fragmented and subject to inconclusive regulation vis-à-vis techniques of rumor, peer pressure and personalized influence. In this sense the subculture of Bangkok professional mediums shares many similarities with most other religious practitioners within the domain of Thai popular religiosity. However, it stands in contrast to the Buddhist Sangha which especially since the bureaucratic reforms instituted in the nineteenth century displays a much greater degree of ideological and social uniformity, standardization and institutionalization as a domain of religiosity regardless of diverse sectarian, territorial or ethno-cultural affiliation.

The volatile and contentious nature of charismatic authority in the subculture was sharply brought home to me when I heard about the repeated, vituperative criticism of one medium by a disparaging former disciple. Over the course of several days, Nut explicitly and obliquely, publicly and privately, criticized Sam, a medium of Jao Mae Kuan Im. Nut accused Sam of various immoral acts and of pretending to be possessed by a virtuous *thep* when in fact she asserted he was only possessed by a spirit of middling virtue. Through a network of mutual friends and acquaintances these criticisms found their way back to Sam and his entourage. As a result, over the next few weeks whenever private consultations were held at which large numbers

of the entourage were present, the various possessing gods who descended warned Sam's followers and disciples about the malicious lies of Nut and offered up a variety of uncharitable explanations as to why she had fallen onto a wayward and immoral path. The controversy provoked much whispered commentary and speculation at the margins of the entourage's social life, and Sam himself was disgusted with and anxious about Nut's accusations. The warnings and advice of the *thep* only dwindled away, however, after Nut herself eventually arrived at the abode and fruitlessly attempted to apologize and make amends with Sam.

*Oscillating religious hierarchy of inflation and deflation.* During much of any entourage's social life, the religious authority of the medium at its center is structured according to the social logics and demands of interactions either within the entourage or along the networks of esoteric lineage empowerment. Although authority as a dyadic relationship in these modalities can be volatile and fluctuating, it is relatively enduring at a collective, generalized level barring crises of authenticity and/or performative failure that can provoke the mass disintegration of reputation and by extension entourage association or membership. At the same time, the ritual logic of annual *wai khru* ceremonies virtually necessitates that a professional spirit medium invite a wide assemblage of other spirit mediums beyond simply those in his or her lineage of esoteric empowerment. This total community of temporarily assembled peers serves as witnesses who collectively recognize, affirm and valorize in public the host medium's social status as an empowered teacher, charismatic authority and virtuous patron. Thus, the *wai khru* ceremony, a ritual requirement and social high point in any entourage's communal life, serves to praise and valorize a single host medium through acts of reverence, deference and submission on the part of all other invited mediums. However, the host medium becomes a deferential and submissive witness in turn when he or she takes over the role of invited guest at the *wai khru* of other

mediums, in a repeated act of obligated reciprocity, over the course of the ensuing annual ritual calendar.

The ritual and social logic of the *wai khru* ceremony, therefore, compels mediums to take part in an oscillating set of exchanges that both elevates and deflates their comparative religious status within the diffuse and loosely structured social relations of the subculture and vis-à-vis their professional peers. It also compels them to participate more often than not in repeated acts of public deference and submission, even if only briefly and ritually, vis-à-vis their professional peers, many of whom are not bound to them in enduring social or personal relations of association, affiliation or even friendship and who are not hierarchically ranked in relation to them in any official or enduring fashion. This oscillating, punctuated, and fragmented logic of structuring religious authority within the subculture, which reaches simultaneously both far beyond and deeply into the legitimacy of any given single entourage, is not shared by other religious virtuosos within the domain of Thai popular religiosity, except perhaps for some types of traditional masters of esoteric knowledge (*mau*) who also hold *wai khru* rituals. Astrologers, palm readers, royal and folk Brahmins, exorcists, and other religious specialists are not required to engage in reciprocal relations of valorization and submission vis-à-vis their categorical peers, nor are they required to engage in repeated acts of public recognition and validation with peers, many of whom are anonymous strangers of unknown authority and legitimacy.

*Competitive, entrepreneurial ethos within a milieu of professionalized identification.* A natural consequence of the duplicative ritual services offered by different mediums, the non-institutionalized and unregulated social relations within the subculture, and the oscillating inflation and deflation of relative religious status and ranking vis-à-vis other mediums is that the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums is characterized by persistent if understated

competition between peers, regardless of whether they are strangers, know associates or even friends. This ethos of competition is buttressed by the fact that for many professional spirit mediums the provision of ritual services to clients, believers and followers constitutes the primary means by which they earn a living. In essence then, each medium acts as an autonomous entrepreneur in competition with an assortment of categorically similar entrepreneurs. This entrepreneurial ethos under conditions of competition, moreover, fuses with the subculture's endorsement of symbolic bricolage and a propensity to seek out the religiously unusual to compel assertive, status and prestige conscious mediums to seek out novel ritual forms, unusual aesthetic registers and ambitious religious projects or services that will make their own beliefs and practices stand out as alluring, compelling and engaging to the wider general public of actual and potential clients. In addition, some mediums seek to brand themselves by claiming unusual or extraordinary expertise in the provision of particular ritual services of blessing, protection, healing or prognostication.

The competitive and entrepreneurial ethos within the subculture is also reflected in the enduring interest that many mediums have in whether and how journalists and mass media publications report on their activities and projects as acts of devoted piety in service to their possessing *jao* and *thep*. In addition, it is common for assertive and ambitious mediums to place advertisements in select mass market print publications in order to advertise to the general public their publicly available ritual services as well as the meritorious religious projects of sacrifice and faith they are engaged in. Not surprisingly however, the competitive and entrepreneurial ethos on display in the subculture, in association with the explicit need to both earn money through services to the public and solicit financial donations in order to finance various

meritorious religious projects, inevitably opens professional spirit mediums up to criticisms of opportunism, chicanery and self-interested deception.

This competitive and entrepreneurial ethos was on obvious display, for example, at the abode of Mali. Prominently located at the doorway into her shrine room was a cabinet filled with various amulets, sacralized cloths and ritual implements, all with tags indicating their cost of purchase clearly attached. In addition, posters very clearly explained to visitors the price for over two dozen different sorts of ritual services that Mali provided to her clients. Moreover, Mali took the time to explain to her followers and assistants why different services cost different amounts and cajoled them to pass these explanations clearly on to clients so that there would be no misunderstandings or complaints by them afterwards. Mali also collected those mass market magazines which had written up accounts about her abode, and clearly placed them in public view at the entranceway to her inner shrine. Furthermore, Mali obviously was very invested in and proactive about her image in such magazines. She personally solicited such journalistic accounts, regularly advertised her services and religious activities in the back pages of prominent religious monthlies, and even ghost wrote one article about her life as a medium that was scheduled to appear in the press. In her opinion, though, all of this activity was simply yet another, if somewhat unpleasant, requirement of successfully serving the needs and wishes of her possessing *thep*.

*Marginality and stigmatization from official and elite institutions.* The Bangkok subculture of professional spirit mediums is subject to sustained if intermittent criticism, stigmatization and marginality from many prominent and authoritative institutions outside the subculture. Journalistic accounts about the subculture are consistently negative, dismissive, and condemnatory, outside of that narrow niche of the media market that either endorses or tolerantly



reports on the diverse phenomena of popular religiosity. Other institutions such as the police or legal authorities, while often trying to remain balanced, are hardly supportive and frequently critical. Monastic authorities, educators and public intellectuals are frequently dismissive at best of professional spirit mediums and their activities, while moralizing modernist reformers – whether religious or secular – are actively critical and occasionally ferment campaigns of demystification, disparagement and censure. Many other prominent and authoritative institutions either take up non-committal stances of an ambivalent or ambiguous nature, or are simply silent (White 2005).

There are no prominent and authoritative institutions or actors that publicly, officially or consistently endorse, defend or support the beliefs, practices or activities of the subculture. Stigmatization is the more frequent response towards the subculture, while benign neglect and marginality is often the best that mediums and members of the subculture can officially expect from those outside the subculture. Such attitudes are not surprising from those who interpret the subculture through the frame of either modernist reform or establishment state Buddhism. However, criticisms can also arise from those animated by the vision of Buddhist inclusive syncretism who perceive particular novel arguments, claims or practices within the subculture as a violation of supposedly traditional ideas about the subordinated meaning and significance of possession.

This proclivity for those outside the subculture to criticize and stigmatize mediums is most obviously on public display in the regular stream of new exposes about possession created by television shows, magazines and newspapers. During my time in the field dozens of such journalistic reports, ranging in tone from skeptical to disparaging to alarmist, were released. This constant drumbeat of criticism fostered a hyper sensitivity and cautiousness in many Bangkok

professional spirit mediums regarding unknown journalists and journalists not from sympathetic mass media. Thus, on several occasions I witnessed Pong, a medium of Umathewi, counseling the members of his entourage in how to politely yet vaguely respond to enquiries from unknown journalists, describing this as the necessary precautions of “public relations” required of servants of the *cao*. He also explained to me how it was necessary for his abode to reduce its public exposure and mute its public ceremonial festivities after several particularly scathing and extended public campaigns of censure instigated by television exposes. Similarly, a relatively inexperienced and young medium, Noi, expressed nervousness about how her reputation might be harmed by negative press accounts about her that echoed the criticisms she had seen or heard about. These and other mediums would occasionally explain drops in the number of clients visiting them as a consequence of ill-informed “bad press” and unfairly caustic media accounts that depicted the occasional bad apples as representative of all spirit mediums.

*Informal and personalized attributions of legitimacy from outside the subculture.* Despite this generalized attitude of marginality and stigmatization, if not explicit criticism and censure, Bangkok professional spirit mediums seek out and secure public endorsements of their status, role and authority from individuals from outside the subculture. These endorsements are typically low key and discrete in character, even when public and official. They also may take the form of ambiguous tolerance according to a rhetoric of “you may not believe, but do not offend,” and are usually informal and personalized in character. Thus, select individuals endorse and legitimize the authenticity and authority of mediums and their activities. However, these individuals do not formally represent or speak for the groups or institutions they belong to, although mediums can rhetorically seek to advance that more ambitious latter claim implicitly or obliquely. Although endorsement by anyone outside the subculture is valued, religious

authorities and virtuosos are the most valued for obvious reasons. Support by celebrities, politicians, (wealthy) businessmen, aristocrats and even foreigners – or any other class of actors seen as generically having a prestigious status – are all also highly valued.

Many ritual activities in the life of mediums and entourages either require or are amenable to the participation of religious authorities from outside the subculture. Thus, Buddhist monks are invited by mediums to receive donations and bless their activities on important ritual occasions. In addition, annual *wai khru* ceremonies frequently can involve active ritual participation by Buddhist monks and Brahmanical experts, and their participation is always performatively highlighted and valorized when it occurs. In addition, many of the larger religious projects of charity, generosity and merit that mediums throw much energy into demand coordination with Buddhist temples, associations and monks. Such participation can hardly be refused by members or institutions of the Sangha which have an ideological obligation to serve as a field of merit for all properly devout laity who wish to support the Sangha. In the rhetoric of mediums however, such responsiveness can be presented as endorsements of institutional support which legitimize their work and activities as mediums rather than as simply laypeople.

This craving for authoritative endorsements was on obvious display in the abode of Sam. Letters from local banks authorizing savings accounts for religious projects and charity works and letters from monastery abbots expressing appreciation for donations and support were prominently displayed on bulletin boards in the public space of his abode. Photos showing the participation of famous celebrities, esteemed Brahmins and monks in his abode's annual ceremonies were prominently placed in photo albums or framed and hung on walls. Glowing journalistic accounts were collected and sometimes embossed in plastic as stand-alone testimonials that could be read by visiting clients. When Sam temporarily ordained as a monk

under the tutelage of the Sangha's Supreme Patriarch, the letter formally granting this mentorship was framed and prominently placed inside the abode so the general public could see it. Oral tales of assistance, support and even secret donations from important and wealthy individuals were told and retold to entourage members, clients and visitors alike as a sign of his abode's popularity, importance and – most importantly – moral legitimacy.

All of these experiences, ideas, practices and social-cum-processual dynamics constitute in combination the practical foundations out of which the charismatic religious authority of professional spirit mediums is cultivated. They also constitute the constraining if enabling boundaries and limitations of that charismatic authority given the encompassing categories, values and normative models of authentic and legitimate religiosity and authority at play within the domain of popular Thai Buddhism. As this wide-ranging discussion of the cultural forms, social dynamics and processual logics of the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums has shown, moreover, the overarching cultural and social logics defining and shaping behavior and experience within the subculture is about much more than prosperity religions, resurgent syncretic supernaturalism, hybrid apotropaic magic, or cults of deification fueled by capitalist markets and the mass media.

The enduring and dominating cultural logics and social dynamics of the subculture, and daily life within it, not only exceed such interpretive frames but they are multi-dimensional and eclectic in their own right. Moreover, these cultural logics and social dynamics have a structuring coherence and trajectory particular to the subculture on its own terms which produces its own unique configuration of moral subjectivity and desire, schemas of interpretation and action, and valued behaviors and goals. While these desires, interpretations, behaviors and goals conform to certain expectations held more generally in the field of popular religiosity beyond the subculture,

they are also at times and in certain ways at variance with those expectations. The subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums in this sense constitutes its own uniquely particular articulation and elaboration of more general cultural categories, ideological beliefs, ritual practices, cultural forms, modalities of social organization, and styles of religious performance and experience on display in the field of contemporary Thai popular religiosity. It both illuminates dimensions and patterns typically unrecognized or ignored by many scholars and reveals how these elements can be creatively articulated so as to constitute novel forms of religiosity within the contemporary post-Reform, post-Establishment era of Thai Buddhism.

### **Professional Spirit Mediums as Active Agents within and Creative Catalysts of Contemporary Thai Buddhist Popular Religiosity**

What was perhaps most unusual about the developments undergirding the efflorescence of Thai popular religiosity in the 1980s and 1990s, however, was the deepening symbolic and social interconnections between these otherwise relatively independent practitioners, movements and associations. This development was first highlighted and analyzed by Jackson (1999a, 1999b). In his analysis of three of the most prominent strands of contemporary Thai popular religiosity – the movements centered around Chulalongkorn, Kuan Im and Luang Phau Khoo – Jackson comments on the “intensifying process of symbolic integration” at work between these otherwise distinct movements which he categorizes collectively as “prosperity religions,” creating in essence a larger, more encompassing symbolic complex which unifies and integrates each of these distinct developments (Jackson 1999b: 273).<sup>167</sup> Jackson carefully elucidates four

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<sup>167</sup> Although Jackson (1999b) orientates his general discussion of Thai popular religiosity around only these three movements, he nonetheless recognizes that the field of Thai popular religiosity is much broader than only them and argues that his general analysis, including the claim of symbolic integration, applies more broadly than to just these three movements.

different ways that this loosely integrated symbolic complex is achieved. First, the sacred spaces linked to each distinct movement typically include the installation of images and blessed statues associated with other popular religious movements or practitioners. Second, individuals integrate devotional worship to numerous strands from this symbolic complex into their personal worship. Third, the commercial manufacturing of distinct lines of ritual products for each strand of popular religiosity employs a type of formal design and aesthetics which is shared across the different movements. Fourth, numerous ritual objects designed to appeal to the participants in any one specific strand of popular religiosity include within the same object images and texts from the other strands of popular religiosity. In effect, the ritual objects and spaces developed within any one given strand of popular religiosity commonly refer quite explicitly and consciously to other components or elements within the larger field of popular religiosity. This constant symbolic cross-referencing, therefore, produces a more or less shared symbolic and semiotic vocabulary, visual and otherwise, dispersed throughout the total field of popular religiosity (Jackson 1999b: 273-285).

Just as important in constituting contemporary Thai popular religiosity as a loosely integrated field of beliefs, practices and experiences, however, are the manifold everyday linkages at the level of shared social practice which exists between the various distinct strands of popular religiosity. Moreover, there are also intriguing indications of deeper historical interrelationships between different strands of popular religiosity which suggest the hidden role that various forms of popular religiosity have played in each others' historical emergence and constitution. These are dimensions of potential integration within popular religiosity, however, which Jackson does not directly examine in much if any detail.

We can get a partial glimpse of the representative range of these various symbolic, social and historical interconnections by briefly examining some of these associations from the perspective of one strand of popular religiosity, professional spirit mediumship. The most obvious symbolic linkage between spirit mediums and other strands of Thai popular religiosity is the fact that, as already noted, Chulalongkorn and Kuan Im have become very popular possessing divinities within the subculture of professional spirit mediums. Within Bangkok alone there are likely hundreds of mediums who claim to be possessed by either Sadet Phau Ro Ha or Jao Mae Kuan Im. In a similar manner, certain famously powerful and knowledgeable, but now deceased, monks such as Luang Phau Sot and others are also known to possess spirit mediums. In this sense then, the pantheon of possessing deities within the contemporary community of professional spirit mediums is itself reflective in part, but not totally, of a larger shared symbolic complex of supramundane entities active within the cosmos from the perspective of popular Thai Buddhist religiosity.

Similarly, although the ritual practices of professional spirit mediums are iconically defined by one particular type of embodied knowledge, practice and experience relatively unique to them, i.e., possession by august and virtuous divinities of one sort or another, they nonetheless frequently engage in a diverse range of ritual forms and techniques that are also employed by other specialists in the field of popular religiosity. As they work to help resolve the problems of their clients, therefore, mediums typically do not simply rely on the supramundane sacral potencies of their possessing deities, but they also make use of various astrological, divinatory and ‘magical’ techniques as the circumstances demand it. Thus for example, numerous general rituals associated with the idea of *chata* (fate or destiny) such as *sadau khrau* (dispelling an inauspicious fate) and *sueap chata* (extending the fate or destiny of someone or something) are

forms of ritual intercession commonly resorted to by professional spirit mediums. Likewise, just as Buddhist monks and other specialists might try to help an individual in distress by blessing him or her with holy lustral water (*rot nam mon*) or blowing an incantation (*pao khatha*) over an object, person or particular body part in need of spiritual strengthening, so too do professional spirit mediums resort to these therapeutic and apotropaic ritual techniques which draw on the efficacious power of sacral potency. In this sense then, professional spirit mediums share with other religious specialists elements of a larger common repertoire of ritual technologies for alleviating worldly dilemmas.

Similar linkages are also evident, however, at the level of social participation and interaction by professional spirit mediums in certain public ceremonies and ritual events organized by other social actors. Thus, although most of the participants in the late night ceremonies at Rama V's equestrian statue are average Thai citizens without any special religious expertise, spirit mediums – sometimes even in full ritual regalia and in a state of possession – also occasionally travel to the royal plaza with some of their entourage in order to set up an offering table and show their devotion to Sadet Phau Ro Ha. For years, professional spirit mediums have also taken part along with the Thai general populace in annual public festivals of popular religiosity within Thailand's minority ethnic communities – the Chinese Vegetarian festival in Phuket and the Hindu festival of Umathewi in Bangkok.<sup>168</sup> Ethno-religious celebrations in the idiom of local cultural heritage sponsored by the state bureaucracies and local civil society, with their grandiose public performances of Brahmanical rites that honor deities

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<sup>168</sup> Cohen (2001) provides the most comprehensive and detailed account of the ritual structure of the Vegetarian festival in Phuket, exploring in some detail the role of spirit mediums within the symbolic meaning and social dynamics of this long-standing historical expression of Chinese popular religion. Cohen does not, however, examine the social significance of the Vegetarian Festival for certain segments of the subculture of Thai professional spirit mediums or why professional spirit mediums from all over the country travel to Phuket in order to take part in the festival. There have been no substantial scholarly analyses of the annual procession of Umathewi and her ethnic Indian mediums in the Silom area of Bangkok.



and stage processions of the gods, also have become occasions when spirit mediums spontaneously and without coordination or official permission engage in public displays of possession (Denes and Tiamsoon 2013). In a similar vein, the public *wai khru* ceremonies of accomplished artistic teachers and their lineages, as occasions when esoteric hermits (*ruesi*) and *thep* are invited down to earth as divine witnesses and protectors, are also settings in which not only spontaneous possessions erupt but at which professional mediums take up an uncoordinated and marginal performative presence (Wong 2001).

At all of these public religious events organized by other actors or communities, professional mediums attend as members of the invited general public and have no official, coordinated or authorized role in the central religious activities or ritual performances, except to a certain degree in the Vegetarian festival. Some of these mediums attend in normal attire as pious individuals, while others attend in the types of ceremonial attire they wear when serving as host for their possessing deities. Commonly, some of the mediums become spontaneously possessed over the course of the ritual event, as they have a propensity to do whenever they attend a ritual event in which *jao* and *thep* are being invited down from the heavens in large numbers to serve as protective witnesses over the occasion. In some cases, professional spirit mediums who become possessed on the margins of the central ritual activity can garner enough attention that audience members approach them for supramundane assistance in the form of oracular divination or auspicious blessings. Sometimes the lines of individuals seeking an audience and consultation that spontaneously emerge can last until long after the primary ritual event itself has ended. In this sense, professional spirit mediums co-opt the religious events of those outside their subculture into venues for displays of their own authenticity, potency, prowess and charisma. As these few examples suggest then, professional spirit mediums are

known to literally insert themselves into the ongoing public ritual performances of a variety of religious actors and communities, activities which are centrally defining of other devotional movements or organized by other religious specialists within the wider field of Thai popular religiosity.

In addition, professional spirit mediums also directly incorporate into their own sacred spaces, ritual events and public ceremonies various symbolic elements, esoteric knowledges and religious specialists drawn from the wider field of contemporary Thai popular religiosity. Thus, statues, portraits and images of important figures in the wider pantheon of supramundane entities – such as Chulalongkorn, Kuan Im, and Luang Phau Ngern – frequently dot the walls and altars of the abodes within which professional spirit mediums receive clients and serve their deities. Even more dramatically, however, on special ritual occasions – whether public, semi-public or private – professional spirit mediums often will, if they can afford it, hire certain other religious specialists who can provide specialized ritual services. This behavior is most typically the case during their annual paying respects to their teacher ceremony (*phithi wai khru*). Thus, Brahmins and Buddhist monks might officiate at certain select ritual moments in the multi-day *phithi wai khru* ceremony when their expertise is most appropriate, while associations or troupes that professionally chant scripture might be hired to publicly chant a set number of sutras in order to auspiciously bless the occasion in general as well as the medium's abode more specifically. In a variety of ways, therefore, professional spirit mediums not only insert themselves into the sacred spaces and ritual activities of other individuals and groups active within the field of popular religiosity, they also selectively incorporate a variety of beliefs, practices and specialists from these very same other domains or groups into their own spaces and activities.

More than just actively taking part in and utilizing the diverse set of esoteric knowledges, ritual forms and ceremonial events distributed across the domain of popular religiosity as elements within their own religious repertoires and subcultural identities, however, there is intriguingly suggestive historical evidence of possible genealogical interconnections between professional spirit mediums and other strands of popular religiosity. In this sense then, professional spirit mediums not only are active agents in fostering cross-cutting symbolic and social linkages with the domain of Thai popular religiosity but they are also important catalysts in generating new cultural and ritual forms within the expanding diversity of a popular religiosity. Thus for example, one newspaper account claims that a spirit medium was centrally involved in helping to initiate the public worship of Sadet Phau Ror Haa at the equestrian statue, a now regular public ceremonial activity which dominates the collective self-understanding and public presence of the devotional movement centered on Chulalongkorn.<sup>169</sup> In addition, the Society for Chanting the Verses on the Victor's Armor is a contemporary incarnation of an infamous nationalistic millenarian movement of the 1970s, Hupphasawan, which was headed by a professional spirit medium who ultimately fell afoul of the Thai state in the 1980s due to his aggrandized religious claims (Stengs 2002). Similarly, other reports indicate that revelatory pronouncements by spirit mediums in the 1980s were instrumental in identifying Jatukham and Ramathep, guardian deities of Wat Phra Mahathat in Nakhon Sri Thammarat, as the protective deities of that town's new city pillar shrine, an act which set in motion the legends of supramundane auspiciousness and blessing that later fueled in turn their expansive cult of guardianship and its outrageously profitable industry of protective amulets that exploded around 2007 (Pattana 2012: 115). More sustained historical investigations likely would reveal the

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<sup>169</sup> See "Satha 'Wikrit' Na Phra Borom Rup Song Ma" ['Odd' Faith at the Royal Equestrian Statue], *Phujatkan Rai Sapda* [*Manager Weekly*], 21-27 December, 1992, p. 13-14, 37.

similarly generative but unacknowledged role of spirit possession and spirit mediumship in other innovative developments in Thai popular religiosity.

As these examples suggest, it is highly plausible that professional spirit mediums, as sources of oracular divination and revelation, introduce novel social or cultural claims which can as seeds take root in that milieu of hidden truths, efficacious sacral potency, miraculous consequences and benefits, and devotional recognition and service that fuels many religious cults, movements and associations in the domain of popular religiosity. As dialogic voices of virtuous supramundane entities, professional spirit mediums are well placed to inject novel yet resonant beliefs, practices, histories and truths into the field of popular religious ferment. However, given their marginalized and stigmatized religious status vis-à-vis dominant religious and non-religious organizations and institutions, it is not surprising that this social function often is displaced, misrecognized or erased from social memory and the historical record. Or that novel beliefs, practices, histories and truths originally introduced into the milieu of popular religiosity by spirit mediums are only taken up for general mainstream use and attribution after having been socially recognized and religiously legitimated through the activities of less controversial and more conventionally authoritative and prestigious religious actors and voices, such as Buddhist monks or Brahmins.

As the case of professional spirit mediums reveals, therefore, the field of contemporary Thai popular religiosity is characterized by more than just a loose symbolic integrity at the level of common cosmological beliefs and a shared visual and ritual idiom. It also displays a loose social, and perhaps even historical, integrity as a common and shared repertoire of ritual practice, esoteric knowledge and ceremonial events which is drawn upon by different types of religious specialists for their own particular purposes. Moreover, these specialists also frequently, yet

selectively, take part in the activities of other individuals, groups and movements that are also active within the field of popular religiosity. Professional spirit mediums draw upon many of these symbolic and ritual repertoires, endorse many of these beliefs and assertions, take part in many of these diverse religious activities and ceremonial events, and even sometimes play a key role in creatively supplementing and adding to those repertoires and activities. Symbolically, socially and materially, therefore, contemporary Thai popular religiosity displays a complexly articulated set of shared beliefs, practices, events and actors, and professional spirit mediums are deeply involved with and invested in its perpetuation and reproduction. Thus, although professional spirit mediums on the one hand undeniably maintain a style, form and logic within their ritual practices, cosmological beliefs and public ceremonies which is unique to them and distinguishes them from other practitioners of popular religiosity, they nonetheless also selectively draw on a larger shared universe of common symbolic forms, social practices and ideological innovations which have come to define the world of Thai popular religiosity at the end of the twentieth century.

In fact, this very cross-fertilization of beliefs and practices, this social and symbolic intermingling of actors, ideas and rituals itself produces and reproduces the total diffuse field of contemporary Thai popular religiosity as a relatively distinct and discrete pattern of specific social relations, cultural values, embodied experiences and contextual identities. In many ways, this symbolic cross-fertilization and social intermingling is more important to the definition of popular religiosity at the level of everyday practice and consciousness than the stigmatizing efforts of modernist reform or establishment state Buddhism which have to varying degrees and uneven effect sought to ideologically and institutionally define and marginalize certain popular practices and beliefs as either heterodox superstitions and illusory supernaturalism or as

backwards folk culture and primitive sociocultural relics of the past. However, the current intensity and scope of this concrete and everyday cross-fertilization and intermingling is dependent upon numerous economic, social and technological developments in recent Thai history, such as standardized commercial production on a mass scale, a wide-reaching and popular national mass media, the convenience of long-distance travel, and the ease with which diverse sociocultural ways of life can both flourish with distinction yet intermingle with few constraints in an urban setting.

Consequently, I argue that the loosely integrated symbolic and social complex of contemporary Thai popular religiosity represents a historically novel sociocultural formation. Certainly there always has existed historically a certain degree of ideological and social integration and cross-fertilization within the domain of Thai popular religiosity. Moreover, this integration and cross-fertilization was no doubt unintentionally intensified by establishment state and modernist reform Buddhism's efforts to categorize many of the diverse beliefs, rituals and practitioners within the domain of popular religiosity as sharing a suspect Buddhist identity, thus placing a previously diverse set of phenomenon within a similar structural position of erasure or exclusion. Nonetheless, even as popular religiosity has diversified in novel ways during its efflorescence in the 1980s and 1990s, it has also simultaneously become more intensely interconnected and integrated both symbolically and socially. In essence, the same social forces and historical developments which have produced this efflorescence of expanding diversity and greater public prominence, as previously described, have also simultaneously laid the foundations for more frequent, intense and pervasive social interactions and symbolic convergences between the various ramifying strands of popular religiosity. The result has been not only a novel reconfiguration and elaboration of many traditional beliefs and practices which

have historically defined Thai popular religiosity at the concrete substantive level, but also a greater degree of mutual articulation and sharing – symbolically, socially, and historically – between the different discrete strands of those assorted beliefs, rituals and practitioners that collectively constitute the field of popular religion. The loose complex of beliefs, practices and individuals that make up contemporary Thai popular religiosity is thus historically novel both in terms of its substantive content and the character of its articulation and integration. The subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums not only reflects these general social and cultural developments, but has in turn helped fuel, shape and direct them as well as it conceptualizes itself in novel ways both inside and outside the interpretive frames of modernist reform, establishment state and inclusive syncretic Buddhism.

### **“Buddhaization” and Religious Upgrading as a General Socio-Cultural Dynamic in Late-Twentieth Century Thai Popular Religiosity**

Often scholars interpret the creative efflorescence of apotropaic-oriented beliefs and practices as evidence of a resurgent inclusive syncretic sensibility returning front and center on the public stage because the social project of establishment state Buddhism has retreated due to exhaustion, opposition and a failure of collective nerve and the social project of modernist reform Buddhism has limited appeal beyond the bourgeoisie and political and cultural elites. This dynamic has been described as a resurgence of supernatural religiosity (Jackson 2012), a dynamic riot of worldly magic and supernaturalism (Pattana 2012), and a reactivation of supernaturalism (Denes and Tiamsoon 2013). For many scholars of this persuasion, the growing public prominence of spirit mediums is a notable index of, and defining characteristic within, this newly robust, diverse and iconoclastic Thai popular religiosity.

How to conceptualize this creative efflorescence within popular religiosity vis-à-vis existing configurations and forms of Thai Theravada Buddhism has occupied many scholar's attention. In particular, the question of how these dynamic innovations in popular religiosity relate to a heritage of inclusive syncretism has resurfaced repeatedly. Both Jackson and Pattana, two scholars who have focused considerable attention on this issue, argue that although coterminous in some senses, recent novel developments also exceed the traditional frame advanced by the religious regime of inclusive syncretism. While acknowledging that the resurgent supernaturalism accentuates long-established patterns of syncretism and tolerance (1999b: 246), Jackson also argues that it has fundamentally reconstituted it as well. Thus, he claims that "[d]uring the boom years [1980s and 1990s], the supernaturalists dominated, and although they would not have seen themselves as radical, their de-emphasis of doctrinal Buddhism in effect challenged the historical hierarchy which had long placed Theravada Buddhism above Brahmanism and animism as the most prestigious Thai religious form" (Jackson 1999b: 316). These prosperity religions are a sign that "a less stratified, more horizontal and more diverse religious formation emerged, in which Thai Theravada and Chinese Mahayana Buddhisms, Brahmanism, and animism came to occupy more similar positions in terms of prestige and honour" (Jackson 1999b: 316).

Somewhat similarly, Pattana asserts that models of inclusive syncretism no longer can account for the dynamism in religious practices, forms and ideologies at play in the realm of popular religiosity. Rather, he asserts that "hybridity rather than syncretism is a more appropriate way to characterize popular Buddhism today" (Pattana 2012: 12). In fact, he specifically points to the pantheon and ritual forms at play amongst professional spirit mediums as evidence that the model of inclusive syncretism in which Brahmanical and animistic elements are subsumed



within a framework dominated by Theravada Buddhism has broken down due to a diversifying, fragmentation and transgression of the elements and hierarchy constituting that symbolic order (Pattana 2012: 11-34).

My outline of the developmental history of Thai religiosity over the long twentieth century parallels in many ways these arguments by Jackson and Pattana. Moreover, I also agree that elements within the general efflorescence, innovation and dynamism of Thai popular religiosity at the end of the twentieth century are evidence of alternative religious sensibilities taking shape beyond the framing visions of modernist reform, establishment state and inclusive syncretism. My sustained discussion of the defining cultural characteristic, social relations and processual dynamics within the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums was designed, in part, to illuminate just such emergent alternative sensibilities and behaviors. Nonetheless, there is a great deal of conventional beliefs, practices and experiences within the subculture that broadly conforms with the cosmological order, hierarchical logics, ritual practices and normative schemas conventionally seen as defining of inclusive syncretism and even certain elements of establishment state and modernist reform Buddhism as well. From my analytic perspective, actors and groups within the domain of popular religiosity are perfectly capable and more than willing to draw selectively and broadly from all three regimes of religious value as frames of interpretation and models of action, just as they also are frequently compelled to create novel beliefs and practices, meanings and behavior beyond those frames. A careful examination of the beliefs, practices, social relations and experiences within the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums reveals just this fact.

However, a careful and fine-grained examination of the beliefs and practices, the ritual forms and the religious activities of professional spirit mediums indicates that this emergent and

alternative religiosity is not as transgressive as Jackson and Pattana suggest. Although it involves a great deal of innovation, fragmentation and diversification, the fundamental hierarchical logic that places Buddhism at the elevated center of a proper religious life is reproduced relatively reliably in the daily life and social world of professional spirit mediums and their entourages. The prestige, honor and hierarchical dominance of a Buddhist orientation and sensibility is sustained and even intensified through many of the innovations found within the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums. This cultural dynamic is a consequence of the fact that within the subculture many actions, ends and entities that might be defined as either non-Buddhist (i.e. animist or Brahmanical), weakly Buddhist (folk, primitive, rural or village) or marginally Buddhist (only involved with spirit cults and worldly concerns) from the perspectives of modernist reform, establishment state and inclusive syncretic Buddhism are framed rather as matters directly concerned with conventional, mainstream Buddhist goals, ends and values. The *jao* and *thep* that possess mediums are august and virtuous with karmic heritages characterized by large stores of *bun barami*. These *jao* and *thep*, moreover, are deeply concerned with protecting and supporting Buddhist institutions and advancing the cultivation of conventional Buddhist goals, pieties and practices. As a result, professional spirit mediums expend considerable effort carrying out conventional merit-making activities, their abodes are filled with conventional Buddhist statuary, regalia and ritual items, and their altars are typically organized according to a symbolic logic in which conventional Buddhist figures of authority reside at their spatial apex. Professional spirit mediums defer to the priority and superiority of the Sangha in principle, even as they argue at times that they are better exemplars of Buddhist values than fallen and corrupt individual monks.

In ways both large and small, the daily lives, activities and statements of professional spirit mediums typically reproduce a hierarchical cultural logic in which Buddhism occupies a dominant and central status in organizing a religious vocation. The innovation and transgression within the subculture instead focuses on redefining the religious character of specific elements within that cultural logic and through that redefinition granting those elements a more prestigious value. The goal is not to fragment or abolish the privileged status of Buddhism within the religious order, but to selectively reconstitute how and where certain practices and experiences are located within that order. In other words, the subculture is animated by a concern with religious upgrading rather than leveling or abolishment, despite what Jackson and Pattana suggest.<sup>170</sup>

I argue that one can observe this project of religious upgrading through a strategy of “Buddhaization” in general across the domain of popular religiosity and not simply within the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums. In the past many religious and ritual activities not directly associated with merit-making and not performed by Buddhist monks made only modest and perfunctory reference to explicitly Buddhist values, cosmological framings or frames of reference. It was enough to simply acknowledge the moral and cosmological pre-eminence and superiority of Buddhism in the initial stages of action, before carrying out the remainder of the ritual activity. Over the course of the twentieth century, however, one can detect evidence of a trend towards more explicitly, more elaborately, and more systematically framing

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<sup>170</sup> Pattana in fact very directly asserts that the upgrading process of “Buddhaization” that Kirsch observed has broken down with a transgressive hybridization occurring now instead across the domain of popular religiosity (Pattana 2012: 13-14). And yet the most sustained substantive example of this hybridity which Pattana discusses, the classificatory logic displayed by the arrangement of diverse deities on the altar of his spirit medium informants, indicates that the dominant status of Buddhism within a symbolic structure of inclusive subordination actually persists among his informants. “On the altars in urban spirit-medium cults, images or statues of famous monks are placed on the second level, on shelf below the image of the Buddha, and they are the most revered after Buddha” (Pattana 2012: 25).

and re-framing various types of religious practice, belief and behavior as truly, properly and thoroughly Buddhist in character.<sup>171</sup>

This historical trend towards upgrading in the style of “Buddhaization” is a direct consequence of the long rise and enduring influence of modernist reform and establishment state Buddhism as regimes of religious value and as interpretive frames through which to conceptualize Buddhism in particular and religiosity in general. Even though ultimately limited in their reach, penetration and dominance, each of these ideological and social projects has transformed the character of religious common sense within Thailand, I argue, by inculcating a much more explicitly and self-consciously “Buddhist” mentality at the center of religious consciousness and behavior in general. They have created a compulsion within Thai citizens to justify the legitimacy of any religious behavior performed and any religious idea advanced in terms of their all-embracing conformity with some vision of an authentic and fully Buddhist imaginaire. Such a dynamic is only evident, however, when religious behavior and practices are contextualized within a deeper historical and broader social context as I have sought to do.

Thus, although religion in Thailand may have entered a post-Reform, post-Establishment era, the practices and experiences of religiosity continue to exist in the wake of those powerful forces and trends that both modernist reform and establishment state Buddhism set in motion. In this sense even actions performed in the frame of inclusive syncretism have to take account of this compulsion toward upgrading what was previously understood as “animist” or “folk Brahmanical” as actually and essentially Buddhist in some more fundamental, if nonetheless quite unconventional, sense. Actors need to wear their Buddhist identity on their sleeves, so to

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<sup>171</sup> A few other scholars have discussed religious upgrading ala “Buddhaization” besides Kirsch. See, for example, Muecke (1992) and Yukio (2003). None have explored it as a general religious dynamic within Thai popular religiosity more generally, however. Holt (2009) has explored his historical and cultural dynamic with regards to Lao Buddhism as a whole.

speak, and the proliferation and intensity of explicitly Buddhist iconography, symbolism and referents attests to this fact. One could even interpret the apotropaic rituals, mundane worldly pursuits, esoteric forms of knowledge and devotional ethos at the center of the cults of Chulalongkorn, Kuan Im and Luang Phau Khoon as upgraded modalities of religiosity that in previous eras and for previous generations would have been unselfconsciously packaged and consumed within the frame of folk Brahmanism or spirit cults. But contemporary Thais desire and require that such aspects of the religious life now be delivered in a cultural form that explicitly and unabashedly announces itself as thoroughly and properly Buddhist, through and through. Thus one turns to Buddhist monarchs, bodhisattvas and saintly monks instead of relying upon nature spirits, ancestral spirits, tutelary spirits and the apotheosized spirits of venerable local heroes.

Similarly, turns toward religious experience and authority in an ecstatic mode by urbanized bourgeoisie and cosmopolitan rural villagers is self-consciously reconceptualized as fundamentally Buddhist in character even as the ambiguity and innovative character of this reconceptualization is obliquely acknowledged by the actors involved. This ambivalence is especially true when the modalities of religious ecstasy are vaguely reminiscent of anything like possession. Thus, for example, Yukio has described how *mau wisa* were largely replaced by *mau tham* in the Northeast during the middle of the twentieth century, with the latter growing in popularity after the 1930s by which time the standardization of establishment Buddhism had consolidated its hold over the Northeast.<sup>172</sup> Both are lay specialists who rely upon spells and incantations, but “*mo tham* are, in a sense, ‘Buddhisticized’ *mo wisa*” (Yukio 2000: 175). *Mau tham* are more powerful precisely because their power is believed to derive from Buddhist

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<sup>172</sup> *Wisa* is a northeastern Lao variant of the central Thai term *wicha*, and refers to an esoteric knowledge of spells and verses used to control spirits and supernatural powers and provide protection. *Tham* is derivation of the Pali “dhamma,” or the Buddha’s teachings (Yukio 2000: 170).

mantras and, more generally, the Buddhist dharma. *Mau tham*, like *mau wisa*, rely upon the ideology of the *khru* to guarantee their power and efficacy just like all folk Brahmanical practitioners. The *mau tham*, however, must obey Buddhist moral precepts, they employ Pali-language incantations, their initiation into the role is considered comparable to monastic ordination, and after their death it is claimed they will be reborn as a Buddhist arahant who has attained nirvana (Yukio 2000: 176-177).<sup>173</sup>

Anan (2000) has described the revitalization and transformation of folk Brahmanical practitioners in northern Thailand since the 1970s. Folk healers known as *mau muang* (specialists of the town) are male laymen or even monks who specialize in the knowledge of astrology, magic, herbal medicine, ritual performances, the manipulation of spirits, and moral power. Their moral authority is based on their control over their knowledge, their devotion to their *khru*, and their adherence to Buddhist ethical and ascetic behavior. Increasingly, it is their ritual power that is most sought out by urbanized middle-class and anonymous clients. *Mau muang* have responded by commodifying their ritual knowledge, and transforming their formerly paternalistic, occasional and low-cost services to fellow villagers into a more professional, formal and full-time clinic-like delivery of high-cost services. Moreover, some *mau muang* have

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<sup>173</sup> Intriguingly, Yukio describes the *mau tham*'s technique of exorcism which involves meditation, the recitation of Buddhist verses, followed by trembling and then communication with malevolent possessing spirits in the language of the spirits. In the end, all of these actions should result in the removal of malevolent spirits either through placation or coercion. Interestingly, in his interviews with contemporary practitioners, Yukio notes that: "Although they behave in a way that resembles spirit possession, according to *mo tham*, these are not spirits or *thewada* (deva) entering from outside, but *khun phatham* [spells of dharma] arising from within their body and these give suggestions as well as moral forces to confront and expel spirits" (Yukio 2000: 177). Here again, in other words, one witnesses that persistent anxiety about spirit possession among folk Brahmanical practitioners who are strongly committed to a Buddhist framework for understanding their own religious identity and power. This anxiety also points to the ideological and moral contradictions which arise when previously "animistic" or "folk Brahmanical" practices are compelled to reconceptualize themselves as exclusively Buddhist in the wake of both modernist reform Buddhism and establishment state Buddhism. For a more comprehensive analysis of the emergence of *mau tham* in the context of the rise of modernist reform Buddhism, the spread of establishment Buddhism and the local historical, social and cultural dynamics of the Northeast region, see Yukio 2003. In many intriguing ways, Yukio's full ethnographic and historical argument (Yukio 2003) parallels the argument I have advanced here regarding professional spirit mediums.

become the charismatic patrons of cult-like groups of devoted followers. *Mau muang* are prone to public displays of their Buddhist ethical character through their public sponsorship of merit making activities.<sup>174</sup>

Pattana has also noted the emergence of ecstatic and possession-like behavior in an explicitly Buddhist frame amongst certain monks as well. In his in-depth examination of a charismatic monk, Ajaan Somsak, widely recognized as highly skilled in apotropaic and “magical” arts, Pattana quotes Phon, a follower of Somsak, who locates the monk’s techniques as rooted in knowledge of *wicha duangtham*, which Pattana translates as “the knowledge concerning Dhammic essence” (Pattana 2012: 38). In addition to facilitating his ability to provide prognostication, blessings, and protection to those who seek him out, this esoteric knowledge also allows him to communicate with spirits. Ajaan Somsak describes the *phithi yok khru* initiation rite through which he learned the arts of *wicha duangtham* as involving conventional *wai khru* ritual elements such as honoring teachers and inviting deities and teacher’s spirit to witness the formal acts of ritual submission to a lineage of empowered instruction. Even more significantly, Somsak asserts that: “The key point is to invite one’s superagency, called *ong tham* (Dhammic entity/calling) to possess each of them [the initiates] while they are deep in trance” (Pattana 2012: 40). Pattana adds that “when the practitioners of *wich duangtham* are deep in trance, they begin to speak in tongues, a language known among them as *phasa tham* (Dhammic language)” (Pattana 2012: 40). Thus, the performative enactment of esoteric knowledge among certain monastic virtuosos, while associated with a variety of

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<sup>174</sup> Anan also reports that *mau mueang* communicate with their *khru* by means of meditation, dreams and partial trance. Yet they deny that they experience full trance which they consider, in an apparently derogatory manner, to characterize spirit mediumship which from their perspective is an exclusively female sphere of practice and experience. Again, one must note the fact that folk Brahmanical practitioners sharply and anxiously distinguish their own religious identities from anything that resembles spirit cults and spirit possession, even though they also experience altered states of consciousness and engage in ecstatic practices and rituals which display clear, if disturbing to them, behavioral parallels (Anan 2000: 61).

behaviors that typically index a possession-like experience, is instead redefined and reframed within an explicitly Buddhist frame, so much so that the possessing entity itself is ontologically identified as Dhamma in the discrete modality of an *ong*.

These three cases suggest, therefore, that the desire within the field of Thai popular religiosity to “upgrade” one’s religious identity through a more exclusive identification with Buddhism, to define one’s religious experiences of an ecstatic nature as fundamentally Buddhist in character and unlike possession practices associated with spirit cults, and to transform one’s religious role into a more professionalized, full-time vocation is not limited simply to the case of professional spirit mediums. Rather, these general trends are instead products of more widespread and pervasive historical transformations within the twentieth-century structure of Thai popular religiosity, and that these trends create tensions and ambiguities within the social, ideological and behavioral logics underlying the religious regime of inclusive syncretism. More specifically, the spread of modernist reform Buddhism and establishment state Buddhism in tandem have fostered a desire among especially non-monastic religious practitioners to improve their social status and moral legitimacy by reconceptualizing the religious foundations of their own practice and authority via “upgrading” and “Buddhasizing” their social roles, religious identities and therapeutic rituals (Kirsch 1977). Similarly, intensifying urbanization and expanding capitalist industrialization have transformed the social and institutional constraints and opportunities, as well as the normative models, within which non-monastic religious practitioners can organize their social relations with clients and followers.

The general transformation in ideology, ritual practice and social organization advanced by professional spirit mediums, in other words, is comparable in many ways to broader changes emerging across the whole field of late twentieth-century Thai popular religiosity. Nonetheless,



the case of professional spirit mediums is so instructive about these transformations precisely because it, more than most other examples, highlights the cultural and social tensions, ambiguities and contradictions which are endemically produced within the transformed structure of late-twentieth-century Thai popular religiosity. Yukio, Anan and Pattana highlight the impact of these changes in the domain of folk Brahmanism and the ritual complex of the *wai khru* when practiced by both monastic and non-monastic virtuosos. Yet folk Brahmanism, as most scholars of Thai religious complexity have long pointed out, has long been more ideologically and socially compatible with Buddhist values and norms than other “animistic” forms of religious practice and experience associated with spirit cults (Kirsch 1977). Professional spirit mediums, by contrast, have responded to these same general structural imperatives by seeking to “upgrade,” reconceptualize and legitimize, within an explicitly and more exclusively Buddhist framework, a worldview and ethos, a practice and experience – spirit possession – which has been centrally identified traditionally with spirit cults and which from certain perspectives has constituted the symbolic, social and experiential antithesis of proper and authentic Buddhism.

The resulting dilemma for professional spirit mediums, then, is that, comparatively speaking, they have fared so much worse despite that fact that they have responded similarly to the same structural demands and imperatives, the same ideological and social constraints and opportunities as other non-monastic and monastic practitioners seeking legitimacy for their ecstatic experiences within the field of twentieth-century Thai popular religiosity. Yet given both the abiding stigma, anxiety and low status attached to spirit possession in general and the radically subversive implications of their attempt to reconceptualize spirit possession as fully and legitimately Buddhist, professional spirit mediums are bedeviled by social obstacles and ideological contradictions they cannot easily overcome. Thus, they aspire to a degree of public

and official religious prestige, authority and legitimacy that they will likely never be able to obtain, or at least not beyond the boundaries of their own subculture. The dominant authoritative institutions of Thai society with regards to Buddhist religiosity – the Sangha, the state and the monarchy – show no signs of publicly valorizing or officially recognizing the authenticity, authority or legitimacy of professional mediums as a category of religious actors. And the Thai general public remains, for the most part, often ambivalent and uncertain about how much respect or legitimacy to grant them as a category of religious virtuosos. In the end, desiring unassailable official legitimacy yet fearing either acrimonious public vilification or sporadic legal harassment, professional spirit mediums often settle instead for the indifference of general public toleration and the limited fame and prestige they can accumulate within the confines of their own subculture.

## **Conclusions**

The emergent, alternative forms of religiosity at play within the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums are one example of the transgressive logic of upgrading in the style of “Buddhaization” at work within the field of contemporary Thai popular religiosity in the wake of the hegemonic and defining influence of modernist reform and establishment state Buddhism. Although those social projects of religion making may have stalled out or weakened in their social influence in recent decades, they have nonetheless over the course of decades of advance subtly reset some of the foundational principles at work in Thai religious common sense. Professional spirit mediums have responded to this new religious common sense, and in the process they have reimagined the experience, practice and social reality of possession as a type of religious behavior. By extension, professional spirit mediums have also reworked

foundational ideas and practices generally at play within the field of popular religiosity, such as devotionism, esotericism, accessible sacral potency and even charismatic authority itself. The degree to which their collective project of religious upgrading is socially recognized and accepted, much less emulated, by those outside the subculture, however, is constrained ultimately by not only critical ideological and social perspectives on the idea of possession unleashed by those same historical projects of modernist reform and establishment state Buddhism but also by constraints on the idea of possession contained within the project of inclusive syncretism. The emergent religious imagination and ethos within the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums consequently resides ambiguously and ambivalently betwixt and between multiple regimes of religious value in a post-Reform, Post-Establishment era that has unlocked religious possibilities and provoked increasingly transgressive creativity in a diversifying field of popular religiosity.

From one analytic perspective, professional spirit mediums have consistently sought to refashion and reconceptualize their religious identity so that it more closely resembles the roles of both folk Brahmanical practitioners and Buddhist monks. They have sought to appropriate those forms of esoteric knowledge, ritual technique and collective ritual which are defining of practitioners like *mau*. At the same time, they also have sought to approximate the normative ethos, ascetic character, religious status, and occupational stability of *phra*. The end result of all these transformations has been that professional spirit mediums have consistently sought to redefine the very cultural meaning and social value ascribed to the practice and experience of spirit possession within the Thai imagination so that they can publicly claim that spirit mediumship is a legitimate, full-time Buddhist vocation and calling.<sup>175</sup> And through this very

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<sup>175</sup> Wijeyewardene has also commented on this defining characteristic and presumption of professional spirit mediums: “Though mediums may appear to be like any other professional in the society, maintained by the services

claim they have repeatedly challenged the hegemonic frameworks and religious regimes of inclusive syncretism (which regards spirit possession to be a marginal religious affair that ultimately stands in sharp contrast to the moral and ethical orientation of Buddhism), modernist reform Buddhism (which regards spirit possession to be a matter of superstition, magic or fraud which stands in sharp contrast to the rational, ethical core of authentic Buddhism), and establishment state Buddhism (which regards spirit possession to be a cultural matter of local custom, folk tradition or archaic backwardness which stands in sharp contrast to Buddhism as a world historical and national religion).

During the course of the last forty years or so, in other words, professional spirit mediums have sought to reconceptualize the religious meaning and value of spirit possession and mediumship in such a way as to create a new, unassailably legitimate and prestigious religious role within the changing wider field of Thai popular religiosity, a role that is recognized by the general public as not only a permanent vocation but also as fully and normatively Buddhist. In this sense, they have sought to fashion a social role and identity as a Buddhist religious virtuoso which follows an alternative route from that of becoming a *mau* (expert) or becoming a *phra* (monk), but which simultaneously selectively appropriates and approximates many of the characteristics typically ascribed to those roles. But the social and cultural recognition, validation, respectability and prestige which would befit such a proper Buddhist vocation and which would result from the bestowal of religious legitimacy upon it has been difficult to achieve within Thai society and culture, at least beyond the boundaries of the professional spirit medium's own subculture. No such formal, official recognition, after all, has been bestowed

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he or she performs for others, they themselves appear to see something more to their position. If they see themselves as what we may call professionals, they are not only professional healers, but exhibit a religious calling...Mediums do not, to the society at large, have any of the attributes of monks. But in their own view, they seem covertly to be challenging the status of monks and certainly consider themselves 'called'" (Wijeyewardene 1986: 184).

upon professional spirit mediums by those most prestigious and authoritative sources of cultural and religious legitimacy within contemporary Thai society – the Buddhist Sangha, the Thai state or the Chakri royal monarchy.

This refusal to bestow officially any such public religious legitimacy upon professional spirit mediumship reflects, no doubt, the ideological and social dilemma posed by professional spirit mediums, for they have, in fact, advanced a radically alternative route to those traditional and normative Thai religious goals of Buddhist sacrality, supramundane efficacy and moral virtue. As Kirsch long ago argued, the underlying structure of Thai Theravada Buddhism holds up as most elevated and supreme those categories of objects and humans that can be classified as *ong*. Some humans, such as kings and princes, are born into this elevated moral status which transcends ordinary humanity. Yet because ordinary mortals can also achieve this status by becoming ordained as monks, Kirsch argues that “Buddhist values push men in the direction of achieving the status of *ong*, as a monk” (Kirsch 1975: 188). It is worth noting in this regard, as well, that *barami* as a sign of elevated Buddhist moral perfection and supramundane efficacy was traditionally seen as most clearly and legitimately found among these same social actors – kings and accomplished monks (Keyes 1999c: 6-8). Thus, the traditional restricted social distribution across humanity of *ong* and *barami* as markers of proper and exemplary Buddhist morality, sacrality and authority parallel and reinforce each other.

Professional spirit mediums, however, utterly confound this restricted social distribution of *ong* and *barami*. The *jao* and *thep* that possess professional mediums, after all, are clearly categorized as *ong*, and that is one of the reasons these mediums so clearly deny that they are possessed by *phi*. Moreover, professional mediums refer to their state of being susceptible to possession by these *jao* and *thep* by asserting that “I have *ong*” (*mi ong*). In addition, in the eyes

of professional spirit mediums, their *jao* and *thep* are suffused with *barami* as properly befits their elevated cosmological status, and *barami* is the very source, sign and guarantee of that elevated moral virtue, charismatic authority and supramundane efficacy that empowers mediums when they are in a state of possession by these *jao* and *thep*. In essence, then, professional spirit mediums in a state of possession are implicitly asserting that they are morally and religiously equivalent, in an abstract classificatory sense, to monks and kings.<sup>176</sup>

The radical ideological challenge of this assertion, however, ultimately resides in the fact that Thai society and culture have no established institutional means to socially control, regulate or authenticate such assertions by professional spirit mediums, nor the behavior which flows from them, unlike in the case of monks and monarchs. There exist methods by which social elites can control access to the status of monk or monarch, just as there exist a set of relatively established norms and procedures for judging who is and is not a proper and virtuous monk or monarch. In this way, the highly valorized, even transcendent, moral authority and power that resides within these roles is subject to a certain degree of control and regulation by the dominant religious and political institutions of Thai society – the Sangha, the state and the monarchy. The moral authority and power of professional spirit mediums, however, is not subject to any similar institutional constraints by social elites. It is instead subject only to those dyadic negotiations which occur between a senior established medium and a new, junior initiate, to the granting or withdrawal of recognition by clients and followers, or to the diffuse power of social sanction provided by occupational peers. It is this confluence of highly valorized religious authority and

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<sup>176</sup> The potential paradoxes and contradictions flowing from this assertion are explored in Muecke's analysis of the otherwise heterodox and unprecedented situation she observed in Chiang Mai in the 1970s: three monks bowing in prostration as disciples (*luksit*) before, and receiving blessing from, a spirit medium who they believed was possessed by Mogalana, who was a disciple of the historical Buddha. This inversion of traditional religious and moral hierarchies between monks and mediums was symbolically reflected as well in the syncretic character of this medium's *wai khru* ceremony which combined elements of folk Brahmanical practices involving the empowered teacher (*khru*) and Buddhist Lenten ceremonies (Muecke 1992).

power and the absence of any institutionalized regulation, I argue, which renders professional mediumship so perennially suspect and even subversive from the perspective of elites within the dominant religious, social and political institutions of Thai society.

Despite the unusually contentious ambiguities and contradictions of religious legitimacy embodied by the modern vocation of professional spirit medium, it is important to understand however that these particular tensions are reflective of more widespread ideological pressures and social trends within twentieth-century, and especially post-World War II, Thai popular religiosity. Widespread twentieth-century historical transformations such as the rising prominence of modernist reform Buddhism, the institutionalization of establishment Buddhism, royalist nationalism and nation-state building, expanding urbanization and intensifying capitalist industrialization have exerted a myriad of ideological, social and institutional pressures upon the structure and substance of Thai Buddhist inclusive syncretism as a project of religion making, as well as the field of popular religiosity more generally. As a result, many of those religious changes highlighted in the rise of professional spirit mediumship are also evident elsewhere across the religious landscape of twentieth-century Thailand. In particular, three significant ideological and social trends visible in the case of professional spirit mediums – reconceptualizing previously beliefs, practices and experiences as more explicitly and narrowly Buddhist; transforming previously part-time practitioners into full-time professionals with a calling; and the creation of relatively autonomous religious subcultures and social worlds – are also visible elsewhere within the field of popular religiosity. As such, these trends point to deeper structural transformations in the overarching character of ideological legitimacy, cultural practice and social organization within contemporary Thai religious complexity in the wake of the multi-faceted challenges posed by modernist reform and establishment Buddhism,

nationalism and nation-building, and urbanization, democratization and capitalist industrialization.



**CHAPTER SIX**  
**THE PROFESSIONAL SPIRIT MEDIUM'S CAREER:**  
**THE NORMATIVE TRAJECTORY OF CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY**  
**AND IDENTITY IN THE SUBCULTURE OF BANGKOK**  
**PROFESSIONAL SPIRIT MEDIUMS**

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, professional spirit mediums exist within a plural and contested relational milieu of competing religious authorities, actors, practices, ideologies and experiences. Their claims to charisma and legitimacy, the religious services they provide, the ritual techniques and paraphernalia they employ, the beliefs and cosmologies they endorse, the forms of social organization and patronage they deploy, and the authorizing sacral powers and experiences they index are all understandable only when located within a complex and multi-faceted set of religious fields of inchoate but patterned heterogeneity, distinctions and hierarchy. The idea, meaning and salience of their possession are only understandable when contrasted with other modalities of possession and mediumship within recent Thai religious history. The idea, meaning and salience of their vocation as a religious calling of a Buddhist nature is only understandable when located in relation to a variety of Buddhist regimes of value that have shaped the mainstream religious consciousness of twentieth-century Thai society. And the idea, meaning and salience of their ritual techniques, religious services and charismatic authority is only understandable when located in relation to a wide variety of other religious actors and virtuosos, both monastic and non-monastic, who have proliferated and diversified over the course of Thailand's last century. The explicit and implicit contrasts evoked by their similarities to and differences from, as well as their claims of identification with and distinction

from, other authoritative figures and practitioners within the wider religious field of popular religiosity strongly shapes the reception of their assertions of religious authenticity, authority and legitimacy within the Buddhist framed milieu of contemporary Thai religiosity.

Nonetheless, this totalizing and comparative framing of their authenticity, authority and legitimacy is typically only obliquely a topic of discussion, implicitly a point of reference, or selectively a matter of immediate concern within the daily lives and struggles of the average Bangkok professional spirit medium. They only rarely directly encounter other forms of possession or other modalities of mediumship, such as Hindu or Chinese spirit mediums, and almost inevitably those are under circumstances of their own choosing. Their interactions with non-monastic religious virtuosos and professionals, such as Brahmins, astrologers, or numerous types of empowered esoteric teachers, is typically only occasional and usually limited in scope to relatively brief and restricted participation within either select ritual moments in the life of the subculture, such as *wai khru* ceremonies, or occasions when they seek out their assistance or consultation. Bangkok professional spirit mediums more regularly encounter and interact with monks and other representatives of the Sangha, but even then these encounters are often mostly intermittent in duration, limited in scope, normatively stereotypic as lay-monastic interactions, and initiated by mediums themselves. The plural and contested relational milieu of competing religious authorities, actors, practices, ideologies and experiences which defines the domain of Thai popular religiosity, therefore, structures and shapes the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums by defining a set of normative and idealized points of reference and opposition against which they define themselves but which has only selective and limited direct influence and impact vis-à-vis the motivated actions and social projects of particular actors or religious virtuosos.

Thus, although monks, Brahmins and other religious authorities are consciously and actively incorporated to varying and limited degrees within a variety of central ritual moments that define the daily lives and confirm the religious authority of Bangkok professional spirit mediums, the dominant socio-cultural milieu of actors, events, practices and experiences that characterizes life within the subculture for mediums is generally devoid of these alternative religious authorities to a large degree except as implicit points of taken for granted and common sense cultural reference. Rather, on a day-to-day basis the charismatic authority and legitimacy of Bangkok professional spirit mediums is forged through social interactions with a range of other mostly non-religious actors and authorities that are specific to the subculture per se as a field of social action. The ability of mediums to legitimately and persuasively lay claim to religious authority, therefore, is primarily rooted in their ability to cultivate, manage, and sustain productive and mutually satisfactory relations with clients seeking advice, followers seeking spiritual refuge, disciples seeking enduring guidance, assistants seeking intimate submission to deities, financial patrons seeking privileged access, junior spirit mediums seeking mentorship, senior mediums seeking dominance, and peer mediums seeking cooperative alliances or competitive brinksmanship. These various individuals constitute the immediate relational milieu of the most pressing, most omnipresent and most salient social actors against which, and in conjunction with, professional mediums define and reproduce, on a daily basis, their charismatic religious personas and authority.

In this sense, the constitution of a Bangkok professional spirit medium's charismatic authority is reproduced on a day to day basis by cultivating and managing his or her social relations with this diverse set of individuals who continually circulate in and out of the ceremonial events and mundane activities, the domestic spaces and public settings, the personal

chores and professional obligations which make up his or her daily life as a devoted servant of *jao* and *thep*. Moreover, on a day to day basis, an accomplished medium's charismatic authority emerges precisely out of this cultivation and management of enduring, mutually satisfying social relations with this wide range of actors who together constitute the principal members of the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums. Thus, although the charismatic religious authority of mediums is always claimed and secured in reference to a wider array of religious actors and authorities located primarily beyond the boundaries of the subculture, it is cultivated and produced more foundationally, consistently and intimately as an ongoing intersubjective affair in reference to a large array of mostly non-religious actors and authorities circulating more immediately within the subculture itself. The more accomplished a Bangkok professional spirit medium is, moreover, the more deeply and expansively he or she engages in a sustained fashion with this subcultural milieu of clients, followers, disciples, assistants, financial patrons, and professional mediums of all sorts. His or her social relations with these actors constitutes the very ground out of which a developmental and expanding career of service to *jao* and *thep* and a biography of virtuous presence is fashioned. And it is by organizing these social relations in interlocking circuits of increasing intensity, reach and endurance that any particular medium is able to achieve and expand his or her authenticity, authority and legitimacy as a charismatically endowed and authoritative religious figure.

I begin this chapter by describing in some detail the extended biography of one Bangkok professional spirit medium. I then outline the stereotypic normative career of a professional spirit medium as a series of discrete roles and its biographical elaboration as a schema of social experiences. Next I unpack the underlying structural and processual dynamics that shape the normative career path of a professional spirit medium, before then turning to explicate the

analytic significance of conceptualizing the religious authority of professional spirit mediums as structured by a sequence of linked but discrete roles and identities. I then examine how the normative career path provides a moral frame for envisioning the unfolding of a particular configuration of religious character and personhood within the milieu of the subculture. Finally I reflect on the criteria of progress by which mediums and those within the subculture mark progress along the normative career path and how that shapes the ethos and practices found within the subculture.

### **The Biography of a Bangkok Professional Spirit Medium<sup>177</sup>**

When in 1995 I first met Sam at his royal abode (*tamnak*) in Bangkok he was in his late twenties, but he had been a professional spirit medium for Jao Mae Kuan Im, the Buddhist bodhisattva of compassion, since his early twenties. Sam only spoke rarely, and even then rather enigmatically, about his youth, and even his most loyal and long-standing followers and attendants at that time only knew the most general details of his early life prior to becoming a medium as well as prior to arriving in Bangkok. Although Sam was born in Chiang Rai province in Northern Thailand, his mother and father were government civil servants who had moved frequently as they were posted to different upcountry provinces. By the time I met Sam, however, his parents were estranged from each other and lived separately in the same town in

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<sup>177</sup> The following biography is a composite narrative I have created from several distinct sources. These sources include oral and unpublished written autobiographical statements by the medium himself. I have also relied upon oral statements and descriptions made by other individuals who knew the medium well, in particular certain select other spirit mediums as well as numerous followers within the entourage of the medium. Lastly, it also relies on several articles published in the popular print mass media that provided profiles of this medium and his abode. No single individual, either the medium or his followers, ever narrated in a single telling a life history which included the temporal or thematic range of events I have included here. This abbreviation is not surprising because most biographical and autobiographical reflections on the life of a professional spirit medium are limited in scope and tailored to a given social setting, audience and range of relatively narrow pragmatic ends and uses in the context of an ongoing agenda of public presentation of self.

Phicit province in the Central region. Sam's father, moreover, seemed generally estranged from the lives of his former wife and all of his children, Sam included.

Sam had two younger sisters. The eldest, Jane, was in her early twenties and worked in a hotel in Nakhon Sawan, while the youngest, Mary, was in her early teens and still in school. During my time in Bangkok, Mary went from living with her father in Phicit to living with Sam in Bangkok, where she continued her schooling under his guidance. She would also sometimes take on the role of an assistant or attendant at the abode, but her participation in the life of the abode's numerous activities was rather irregular and undemanding. Frequently Sam's mother would travel down to Bangkok and stay for one or two weeks with Mary and Sam at the abode. She also regularly and actively took part in many of the various major annual celebrations organized by Sam's abode. Sam's father only occasionally showed up in Bangkok, and even then usually only to participate, with a certain degree of reserve and at the margins of activity, in the most important of the abode's annual celebrations. Typically he would stay in Bangkok at the abode for only as long as the ritual event itself before returning home.

In a few conversations with me and others, Sam's mother indicated that in her youth she had experienced bouts of possession herself, but I found it difficult to get her to elaborate in any detail about this part of her life. According to Sam's public pronouncements, however, when he was growing up his mother and father did not really believe in Chinese *jao* in general or Ong Jao Mae Kuan Im in particular, nor did either of them have any Chinese blood in their family lineages. Consequently, he claimed that he had not grow up with any knowledge about Jao Mae Kuan Im or the practices of paying respect to her which are common among Chinese families in Thailand. As an ethnic Thai, however, he explained that he was aware, like most people, of various other supramundane beings (*ong thep*) that possessed people, as well as other potent

sacred beings and objects (*sing saksit*) within the Thai Buddhist cosmological order that could provide blessings and protection.

After completing high school, Sam proceeded to study further by enrolling in a program in the hotel and tourism industry in Chonburi province, located on the Gulf of Thailand to the east of Bangkok. After finishing the program, he stayed on in Chonburi to work. But eventually he became very bored with, as he put it, the pleasures of the mundane world. It occurred to him that he would like to quit his job and ordain as a monk for life, so he asked his father for permission to do so. But Sam's father would not agree to this change of plans. Sam was the oldest child in the family and therefore his parents expected him to become their source of support and refuge (*thi phueng*) as they grew older, something that likely would prove difficult if he chose the life of a monastic renunciant as he seemed to indicate was his desire. Instead, Sam's father demanded that he study accounting in Nakhon Sawan, which he proceeded to do. And it was at this time, while he was studying accounting yet feeling frustrated and bored, that he had his first encounter with the miraculous power of Jao Mae Kuan Im.

Sam claimed that even up until this time he hardly knew anything at all about Jao Mae Kuan Im, although a fellow student had taken him along to some annual paying respect to one's teacher ceremonies (*phithi wai khru*) organized by the professional spirit mediums of Nakhon Sawan, including one by a medium of Jao Mae Kuan Im. Sam recalled being surprised (*tok cai*) to see how adroit Jao Mae Kuan Im was in healing the ill, in removing black magic curses from victims, in dispelling misfortune from the lives of the unfortunate, and in helping out everyone who came seeking assistance from her regardless of their problem.

One day, however, a fellow student took him along to an annual *wai khru* ceremony of a famous spirit medium in Phicit, which is not that far from Nakhon Sawan. After meeting various

*jao* and *thep* at this annual *wai khru* ceremony, he returned home only to dream of Jao Mae Kuan Im that night. Communicating with Sam through his dreams, she told him that he had been sent down to be born in the mundane world in order to liberate humanity from suffering. And she asked him to help her in her task of liberating humanity from suffering by agreeing to become her medium, a decision which would aid her in further building up her *barami* so that she could assist humanity even more. At first Sam did not believe this dream very much and ignored Jao Mae Kuan Im's request. But later a relative took him on a tour of medium abodes. In one abode, a medium of the local city pillar (*lak mueang*) did not pay him much attention until he approached for a personal audience (*khao fao*). At that point the medium suddenly pointed at him and exclaimed to everyone present that Sam was a child of Jao Mae Kuan Im and that she wanted him to become her medium by immediately undergoing an initiation ceremony (*phithi rap khan*). Taken aback and impressed that a medium he had never met before could recount back to him his very own private dream that he had told no one about, Sam agreed to take part in the ceremony.

Yet although at one level Sam had seemingly come to terms personally and publicly with his new calling and responsibilities, neither his family nor his surrounding social environment were as accepting. Sam remained a student studying accounting, yet the demands of caring for the great numbers of people in trouble who searched him out seeking assistance made it very difficult to continue effectively with his studies. Moreover, neither his mother nor his father was happy with this new turn of events, according to Sam. Their complaints and his disagreements with them intensified as Sam tried unsuccessfully to balance his responsibilities as a student, an eldest son and a spirit medium. Under pressure as both sick people who had been turned away by hospitals as untreatable continued to seek him out and his exams at the end of school term



approached, Jao Mae Kuan Im again came to Sam in his dreams. This time she asked him whether he was going to choose the life of a student or the life of a medium, explaining that by truly helping one person in need one improved one's *barami* greater than by building even a seven story cedi.

Still, the tensions, confusion and irritation remained. Determined to seek clarification, Sam went to a local vegetarian hall (*rong je*) and shrine (*san*) that housed a Jao Mae Kuan Im statue and made an offering of 136 lit incense sticks, fearing in his naivety that Jao Mae Kuan Im would not hear and respond to his request for relief if he only lit a few sticks of incense. Praying (*athithan*) for assistance, Sam asked Jao Mae that if she was truly sacred and real and could miraculously do anything, why did his troubles persist and why could not she resolve them. Suddenly, however, the incense sticks he was holding flared up into bright conflagration of fire, stunning and scaring the other Thais who had come to the shrine to pay respects to Jao Mae Kuan Im so much that they feared the shrine would catch on fire. Nonetheless, no more direct answer was forthcoming from Jao Mae Kuan Im herself, and Sam worried that perhaps he had only angered her further with his questions.

Later that night, lying in bed half awake and half asleep, Sam felt a tightening in his chest and an inability to breath. Fearing that his heart would stop beating and he would die, he tried to call out to his mother, father or siblings for help but they did not hear him. Drifting off into sleep in pain, fear and anxiety, he slipped into a dream. In this dream he saw a figure descend in a fluttering monk's robe and shout "You are the medium (*rang*) of Jao Mae Kuan Im" three times, only to then magically soar up into a rain cloud. Waking up in shock, Sam was overwhelmed suddenly and completely with recognition of the value of each sick person's life and his own desire to help them.

After this experience, Sam redoubled his effort to heal the afflicted who sought him out. And as more and more sick people were healed through the power of Jao Mae Kuan Im, the doubts of his family decreased slowly. Still, their faith truly deepened only after Jao Mae Kuan Im cured the raging sickness and fever of Mary, Sam's youngest sister. After suffering days of fever that had not been helped at all by the medicines prescribed by a doctor, Mary dreamt that she saw hundreds of adolescent boys walking in a procession and carrying a palanquin. They stopped in front of her house, and a woman with a look of delight and contentment on her face who was wearing a beautiful white outfit stepped down from the palanquin. The young boys cried out that Ong Phra Mae Kuan Im had arrived to help. Then Ong Jao Mae walked over to Mary and blew a prayer over her head, after which she turned away and climbed back up on her palanquin. Then next morning when she awoke, Mary's illness was completely gone, and the respect for Jao Mae Kuan Im increased within the family once they heard about Mary's dream the night before.

The confidence and support of Sam's family fully solidified, however, only after Jao Mae Kuan Im intervened to heal Sam's ill paternal grandmother. His grandmother had fallen ill suddenly and ended up in a hospital intensive care unit because of a lung disease. Given her advanced age and the seriousness of her illness, physicians explained to Sam's father that her chances of survival were slim. Even though he did not fully believe in the reality of spirit possession, Sam's father in desperation came to Sam and asked him to become possessed so that Jao Mae Kuan Im could save Sam's grandmother. Together they went to the hospital and at the hospital Sam beseeched Jao Mae Kuan Im to come down and possess him, which she did. Then Jao Mae Kuan Im entered the ICU, walked up to Sam's grandmother, placed a hand on her forehead and blew incantations of healing over her head several times. Jao Mae Kuan Im then

returned to the family's house, where she performed a ceremony to extend the life (*tau chiwit*) of Sam's grandmother for five additional years, explaining that her time of death had not yet truly arrived. Jao Mae Kuan Im also sacralized holy water (*nam mon*) which the grandmother had to drink as well if she was to recover. In response, Sam's father vowed that if Jao Mae Kuan Im could save his mother, he would ordain as a monk for one lenten season in honor of Jao Mae Kuan Im, as well as make further merit through donating to the Sangha one set of forest robes. Later, the holy water was added to the grandmother's glucose drip and she began improving immediately. The doctors were stunned by this miracle, and after only a few days they discharged her so that she could recuperate fully at home, which she subsequently did.

In the months and years that followed, Sam left behind his life as a student and devoted himself fully to serving Jao Mae Kuan Im. He opened an abode in Phicit and called it, at Jao Mae Kuan Im's bidding, The Abode of the Thousand Armed Jao Mae Kuan Im. He served Jao Mae Kuan Im and a suffering humanity by regularly undergoing possession and helping to alleviate the troubles of those clients from near and far who sought him out. Over time, the number of *jao* and *thep* who possessed him expanded to include others such as Phra Mae Kali, Phra Ong Chai An Hai Yii and Phra Ruesi, although Jao Mae Kuan Im remained the central dominating supramundane presence in his life. Through the power of these various *jao* and *thep*, he cured the illnesses of those who could not be helped by doctors, monks or other mediums. He predicted future ill fortune and tried to protect his clients from it, although only some followed his advice. He successfully confronted other mediums who surreptitiously sought him out in order to test his moral virtue and supramundane efficacy. He organized and led a series of annual public and private ceremonies designed to valorize and celebrate various *thep*, with his annual *wai khru* ceremony being the most important. He traveled throughout Thailand and even abroad to China,

visiting sacred sites and statues that were associated with the presence and power of Jao Mae Kuan Im or other supramundane entities which he served. With the help of other mediums and sympathetic Buddhist monks, he organized special religious projects like the building of a vegetarian hall, the founding and sacralization of a large thousand armed statue of Jao Mae Kuan Im, and the donation of forest robes (*pha pa*) to the Buddhist Sangha. He was commissioned to erect or refurbish so many protective deity shrines (*san phraphum* and *san jao thi*) that his followers nicknamed him “Lord Father of a Hundred Shrines” (*Jao Phau Roi San*). In all of these ways, Sam slowly built around himself an entourage of followers and clients who had deep faith in the power and virtue of Jao Mae Kuan Im and who were dedicated to supporting Sam as her intermediary and medium.

Less than a year before I first encountered Sam and his abode in Bangkok, he met another spirit medium, Pong, at a famous large statue of Jao Mae Kuan Im in the Central Thai province of Phitsanulok. Pong was a younger spirit medium from the Southern province of Chumphon who was possessed regularly by Phra Jao Mae Umathewi as well as other supramundane beings. They quickly became friends and contemplated the idea of working together in the same abode. Around the same time, Jao Mae Kuan Im was commanding Sam to relocate his abode to a larger city where he could help more people as well as spread her fame and virtue more broadly. Eventually a female follower from Bangkok suffering from breast cancer searched out Jao Mae Kuan Im and Sam in Phicit and subsequently was healed. Overflowing with gratitude and faith, she suggested that Sam relocate his abode to Bangkok, offering to financially assist in the founding of his new abode. And so in 1994 with both her assistance and the help of other followers, Sam relocated his abode to a planned housing estate (*mu ban cat san*) in the western suburbs of Bangkok. He renamed it The Royal Dharma Abode of the Holy Thousand Armed

Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, and was joined in Bangkok by Pong who agreed to serve as both a junior medium and an assistant at the new abode.

Once in Bangkok, Sam and Pong proceeded to develop their abode under the frequent guidance of directives from Jao Mae Kuan Im, Jao Mae Umathewi, and the other spirits that regularly possessed them or visited them in their dreams. Their lives were filled with the same types of obligations, challenges and activities as they had been before for Sam in Phicit – granting audiences at the abode to people in distress, performing special ceremonies outside the abode at the request of clients and followers, organizing and leading the annual ceremonies of the abode, and establishing friendships and alliances with other professional spirit mediums in the region and beyond. In all these ways they sought to expand and consolidate their entourage of loyal followers and supporters at the same time. In response to the guidance and direction of their various possessing deities, however, some of their specific activities and concurrently running projects changed. They traveled to India for a month to visit several of its most holy places, such as the source of the Ganges river in the Himalayas. More importantly, they began an ambitious project to build a 22 meter high statue of Jao Mae Kuan Im inside the walls of a Buddhist monastery located in that small southern town in Chumphon province from which Pong originated, a project which occupied a huge amount of their time, attention and financial resources during the time that I spent with them in 1995 and 1996. And by the time I left Bangkok in 1996 they were planning to relocate their abode yet again within Bangkok to a larger building that could better accommodate the expanding number of statues, ritual items and sacred objects they were continuously adding to their abode.

When I returned briefly to Thailand in the summer of 1998 the abode was now twice the size it had been in the past and much more elegantly designed and decorated, having relocated to

a nearby new set of row houses in the same planned housing estate. The statue of Jao Mae Kuan Im in Chumpon had been essentially completed and plans were in the works for building a vegetarian hall and other ancillary buildings nearby within the same monastery compound. Under the direction of Jao Mae Kuan Im, Sam and Pong were also now exploring the possibility of building a center in Chonburi, a province on the seaboard to the east of Bangkok. The center would support the propagation of Buddhism, and they had already drawn up some initial landscape and design plans. More personally satisfying for Sam, however, was the fact that he finally was able to enter the Sangha. Jao Mae Kuan Im had answered his prayer that not only would he be able to ordain as a monk but that he should receive his monastic robes from the grand patriarch of the Thai Sangha. And so, after a brief trip to Hong Kong with a few followers in order to pray and ask for a blessing from a famous Buddha statue there, he was ordained in the Thammayut order at Wat Bowoniwet in Bangkok at the beginning of the 1998 three month lenten period. Later he received permission to relocate and remain for the duration of the lenten period at the same temple in Chumphon where the 22 meter statue of Jao Mae Kuan Im was located. But he planned at the end of his three months as a monk to disrobe and return to serving Jao Mae Kuan Im more actively and with greater freedom outside the Sangha than he ever could as a monk. He was concerned, after all, about the progress of the many projects he was working on, as well as the fraying ties of commitment and solidarity within his entourage that were resulting from his extended absence from Bangkok and the abode while he was ordained and living elsewhere.

### **The Stereotypic Normative Career of a Professional Spirit Medium and its Biographical Elaboration**

The biography of every professional spirit medium I ever encountered is, of course, ultimately unique and particular in the specific tale it tells. When examined at a sufficiently nuanced level of precise substantive detail from the perspective of an interested anthropological observer, the full narrative of each medium's exposure to, reconciliation with and enactment of his or her role and identity as a virtuous and efficacious servant of one or more *jao* and *thep* inevitably reveals a uniquely distinct texture, trajectory and momentum of dramatic social and personal encounters and contextual challenges, obstacles and triumphs. In part, this biographical particularity is a consequence of the inevitably unique configuration of socioeconomic distinctions, such as class, ethnicity, gender, level of educational achievement, occupation and region of birth or residence, which every medium brings to his or her experience of possession and mediumship.

The ultimate biographical uniqueness of each medium is not simply an etic sociological and psychological fact, however. It is also an emic and culturally valued fact within the subculture of professional spirit mediums, a fact which is widely celebrated and cultivated by mediums themselves, as well as their followers, clients and supporters. Mediums, and their followers, excel at and revel in their ability to tell and retell dramatic stories of distinctive miraculous power, success, prestige and valorization which are drawn from the larger, and still-unfolding, biographical trajectory of a medium's life as a devout servant of virtuous *jao* and *thep*. Moreover, within the subculture of professional spirit mediums, the social significance and pragmatic value of these stories and the amazing events they recall often rest directly on their ability to convincingly portray each medium as compellingly distinct from, and even ideally in some ways superior to, other professional spirit mediums (as well as, at times, other sets of actors – such as monks, *mau* or modern doctors – who also might be able to offer up assistance

that could compete with and rival the thaumaturgic or karmic skills and efficacy of mediums). Accomplished professional spirit mediums are expected, both by themselves and by others within the subculture, to embody and convey a unique personal biography of trials and achievements that ultimately bears witness to the moral virtue (*barami*) and supramundane efficacy (*apinihan*) of those *jao* and *thep* which regularly possess them and with whom they come to so intimately identify.

However, the social salience and cultural persuasiveness of each medium's personal biography as an account of authoritative and distinguishing authenticity also rests on its ability to represent an individual life as a uniquely compelling rhetorical variation on and exemplification of a more general type of biographical career. Hence, these rhetorical embellishments on and exemplifications of the typical medium's life must not only be familiar, acceptable and intelligible to engaged and informed members within the subculture, but they must also be judged as plausible, compelling and valuable as well.<sup>178</sup> In other words, each accomplished professional spirit medium's biography – as both a collection of cumulative historical experiences and a narratively recuperated representation of those experiences – must convincingly present itself as a coherent and authentically meaningful improvisation on a more basic and shared normative model which explains who a real medium is, how one becomes a true

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<sup>178</sup> These biographical narratives must also resonate with some degree of familiarity and intrigue, if not always complete understanding or persuasiveness, to individuals outside the subculture who are more likely to be unfamiliar with those uniquely distinguishing cultural categories, cosmological interpretations, ritual practices, forms of language, styles of conduct, and modes of affective display widely accepted within the subculture. Without some significant degree of resonance and familiarity, professional spirit mediums would find their experiences, practices, beliefs and services unappealing and incomprehensible to the general Thai public at large, a potential audience from which they continually must draw clients, some of whom they will then cultivate into followers. As a result of this fact, one can sometimes observe mediums or their followers engaging in a strategic negotiation, selection and translation of particular biographical details in the telling and retelling of important events or experiences in the life of a medium, with the overall presentation fashioned to take account of different social contexts or audiences and the degree to which they are envisioned as informed, accepting or supportive of subcultural values, norms, goals and expectations.



medium, and what kinds of challenges and successes are most typically emblematic of the authentic medium's life and career.

In this sense, therefore, I argue that there exists within the Bangkok subculture of professional spirit mediums an elemental framework or scaffolding of shared yet general normative expectations regarding some of the most intimate personal experiences of an individual's life history around and through which the substantively thick and historically particular biographical details of any given individual medium's life are elaborated. This basic normative framework underlying the accomplished professional spirit medium's career and biography is constituted not only by a series of stereotypic general experiences, realizations, events and challenges which the typical medium must encounter, but also by a stereotypic temporal trajectory for successfully resolving the particular challenges posed at each juncture within this normative career path. These events, this trajectory and the general values and meanings embedded within, and exemplified through, an individual's progress along this biographical trajectory constitute what I consider to be the stereotypic career of the competently successful and even extraordinarily accomplished 'typical' professional spirit medium.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Careers as coordinated and typified assemblages of activities, practices, roles and experiences structured as a normatively expected temporal sequence of developmental stages is an analytic concept that emerged out of the Chicago school of qualitative ethnographic sociology. It is most strongly associated with the work of Becker 1953, Becker and Strauss 1956, and Hughes 1958. Although originally developed to study professional occupations, it subsequently was employed to analyze a wide variety of institutionally and/or socially bounded or embedded enduring roles, including stigmatized and deviant identities (Goffman 1961, Scheff 1966, Luckenbill and Best 1981). While focusing on adaptation, socialization and meaning making in the processual linkages between social structure, biographical development and individual action, most studies of career focused on entry into and the initial stages of a career but typically neglected intermediate stages and/or exit from a career. Barley 1989 provides a retrospective intellectual and disciplinary history of the concept of career and its potential value in mediating between agency and structure, persons and institutions, as well as analytically articulating the recursive, dialectical production of the institutional and interactional domains of social life. Tavory and Winchester 2012 emphasize the embodied and non-discursive social learning of orientations, competencies, perspectives, attention, affect, and habit in their development of the idea of the "experiential career" as a means of studying the unfolding definition, shaping and routinization of experiences retrospectively labeled as religious. Two wide-ranging, multi-faceted assessments of "career" as an analytic concept are Arthur, Hall and Lawrence 1989 and Gunz and Peiperl 2007.

More specifically, the biographical career of professional spirit mediums as both lived experience and narrative representation displays, I argue, a common, underlying form composed of six basic moments or junctures which I have thematized as six roles that the typical medium displays competency in as he or she advances along the conventional career path. Each of these moments or junctures is characterized by a distinct, fundamental, and uniformly consistent, yet nonetheless general, set of social and personal challenges. These challenges, when successfully resolved, are in combination cumulatively defining of not only the overall general social role and identity claimed by professional spirit mediums, but also the general forms of charismatic authority and authenticity claimed by mediums in their various public presentations of self.<sup>180</sup>

The first moment or juncture in the stereotypic career of a professional spirit medium is characterized by the challenge of an individual's initial destabilizing experiences of illness and possession, experiences that signal the disruptive eruption of a *jao* or *thep*'s overwhelming presence, desires and demands within an individual's life. The challenge of this supramundane presence and these pressing desires and demands are successfully resolved when an individual accepts his or her obligations toward a *jao* or *thep*, a turning point which is marked ritually by an initiation ceremony (*phithi rap khan*) and socially by an individual's formal and public recognition of his or her new identity and status as someone with a propensity to possession (*mi ong*) that has been called to service.

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<sup>180</sup> Perhaps given their historic disciplinary predilection for studying small-scale, non-industrialized social worlds, anthropologists have not utilized the concept of career very much. However, they have employed the notion of life stages instead. Johnson-Hanks 2002 argues for re-envisioning life stages and the life cycle framework in anthropological theorizing which suffers in her opinion from an overly totalizing, institutional and regimented notion of status transitions that obscures the partial, nonsynchronous, uncertain, negotiated and contested character of most actual status transitions when social identity is more accurately envisioned as a composite and ambivalent project. Johnson-Hanks advances the idea of "vital conjunctures" as mediating between structure and action and as aggregating life history experiences as aspirational stages of imagined futures which are rendered experientially real and coherent through institutional projects of intersubjective and coordinated social meaning making.

The second moment or juncture is characterized by the challenge of other people's suffering and the demands made by a medium's virtuous possessing *jao* or *thep* that the medium assist and help strangers who are suffering from diverse worldly afflictions, dilemmas or obstacles. This challenge is successfully resolved when the medium overcomes any personal hesitancy or reluctance and accommodates himself or herself to the desires of his or her *jao* and *thep* by providing efficacious prognostication (*kan tham nai*), protection (*kan pokpaung*), blessing (*uai phon*) and healing (*raksa rok*) to individuals in need.

The third moment or juncture in the stereotypic career of the professional spirit medium is characterized by the challenge of meeting the *jao* and *thep*'s desire that the medium become an abiding and dependable source of refuge (*thi pheung*) and a benevolent guardian (*phu khum khraung*) to other people who regularly depend upon him or her. Meeting this expectation requires a medium to provide benevolent support, assistance and patronage to, ideally, all of humanity and all devout Buddhist practitioners. More practically, such support, assistance and patronage typically centers on the medium's own entourage of disciples (*luksit*), followers (*luklan* or *lukliang*) and believers (*khon nab thuea*) including assistants (*luksamun* or *phu chua luea*) and benefactors (*phu sanap sanun* or *phu borijak*). Mediums successfully resolve this challenge by founding an abode or 'royal residence' (*tamnak*), cultivating an entourage of devoted followers and disciples, and using the financial and social support of these followers to engage in various virtuous activities that guide these individuals towards a pious life of Buddhist morality, service and respect. They also engage in activities designed to advance the piety of an anonymous public and to celebrate the moral virtue and supramundane efficacy of their possessing *jao* and *thep*.

The fourth moment or juncture is characterized by the challenge of serving as a wise, respected teacher and mentor to junior mediums who are subordinate apprentices. In meeting this expectation the competently accomplished medium needs to provide advice, guidance and instruction to particular junior mediums who offer in return public and private gratitude, respect and submission. Mediums successfully resolve this challenge by creating a public lineage of subordinate apprentices who publicly display this submission and valorization by undergoing the *khraup khru* ('covering the teacher') ceremony in which they affirm the esoteric superiority and empowerment of the medium as a *khru*, either during private ritual occasions or more likely during the annual *wai khru* ceremony.

The fifth moment or juncture is characterized by the challenge to mediums that they achieve, within the subculture's implicitly competitive environment but beyond the confines of just their own entourage, social recognition and valorization of both their own personal charismatic authority and legitimacy and the supramundane authority and legitimacy of their *jao* and *thep*. This challenge is successfully resolved through the medium's continuous efforts to cultivate social relations of alliance, support and patronage with other significant religious actors and authorities, most importantly other professional spirit mediums. These social relations are then mobilized and displayed most prominently, significantly and publicly on the occasion of each medium's annual *wai khru* ceremony when other mediums publicly display their deference to and valorization of the host medium's authority and prowess. In these moments the medium is publicly affirmed as a charismatic leader of not only his or her own entourage, but also of larger collectivities within the subculture as well.

The sixth moment or juncture is characterized by the challenge of serving as a meritorious patron of beneficial and virtuous religious projects of spiritual value to a troubled

and suffering humanity beyond the boundaries of the subculture. In this process mediums cultivate a range of collegial and supportive allies beyond the subculture, such as Buddhist monks, Brahmanical priests, famous celebrities, wealthy businessmen or influential politicians or bureaucrats, for example. The cultivation of these authoritative actors, especially religious virtuosos, facilitates the achievement of the medium's religious projects of virtue which honor and fulfill the benevolent desires of their possessing *jao* and *thep*. This challenge is successfully resolved when through the pragmatic assistance and authorizing legitimacy of these non-subculture actors mediums are able to effectively and successfully complete these projects of virtue which spread the fame and reputation of their possessing *jao* and *thep* beyond the reach of their entourage and the horizons of the subculture into the wider, encompassing social world.<sup>181</sup>

Reflecting back on Sam's biography as a professional spirit medium through the prism of this segmented model of a normative stereotypic career, one can note more or less clear moments of resonance in his narrative with each of these six ideal typical moments or junctures. For example, Sam's personal life history clearly reveals him as struggling to come to terms with and accept Jao Mae Kuan Im's selection of him as her spirit medium, an accommodation which was dramatically symbolized and publicly confirmed in his encounter with the medium of the city pillar who miraculously identified him as chosen for possession by Jao Mae Kuan Im and who then subsequently performed an initiation ceremony (*phithi rap khan*) for Sam. Within Sam's biography one can also see him struggling over time to transform his established occupational,

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<sup>181</sup> It is important to note that each of these six moments or junctures in the stereotypic biographical career of a professional spirit medium often has its own typical set of subsidiary biographical moments and challenges as well. Thus, there also exists a common vocabulary of potential typical or standard experiences, events, encounters, challenges and realizations within each of these six more encompassing moments or junctures within the professional spirit medium's standard biographical career as well. Often the individual biographical narratives of any given medium elaborates upon and weaves together a uniquely personal tale out of a select number of these subordinate elements characteristic of each juncture in the overall normative career trajectory.

familial and personal identity so that they could accommodate his new role and identities as a spirit medium.

Similarly, Sam's biography reveals first his struggle, and subsequently his family's struggle, with his growing and intensifying need to accept his moral obligation – as a devout servant of Jao Mae Kuan Im – to help alleviate the suffering of others. Healing the afflictions of anonymous strangers, an initially occasional activity which created conflict within Sam's life, was transformed over time into a regular and valued activity that was eventually sought out as desirable even by his own family members who were originally suspicious and critical of it. Furthermore, Sam's biography reveals hints of his slowly growing confidence in his ability to act like a proper and respectable dispenser of supramundane assistance and therapeutic intervention.

Sam's biography also highlights the importance of his successful efforts to serve as a source of refuge and a benevolent patron to his entourage of followers in particular and humanity in general, obligations above and beyond simply healing the afflictions of, or providing supramundane protection to, particular anonymous individual clients. Building memorial statues, moving to Bangkok to serve a larger public, erecting protective deity shrines, organizing donations to Buddhist temples, providing relief to the poor – all of these constitute just a few of Sam's ongoing activities designed to answer the demands of Jao Mae Kuan Im by serving as a source of benevolent protection and support for both his intimate entourage of followers (individuals who have sought him out and are committed strongly to him personally) and a more anonymous Thai society and humanity (individuals who have not directly or explicitly requested his assistance or are not strongly committed to him personally).

In the details of Sam's biography one can also see intimations of the challenge of becoming a respected teacher and mentor. He was able to not only cultivate Pong as a junior

medium within his lineage of instruction, but he was able to convince Pong to relocate to his abode and to serve in essence as his second in command. Thus although their abode became the focus of a single entourage organized around their joint leadership and protection, it was also clear that they were asymmetrically positioned as leaders with Pong regularly deferring to the instruction and guidance of Sam. In the process, Sam's status as a respected teacher was reproduced on a regular, even daily, basis, rather than only intermittently via occasional or annual rituals of subordination.

Through his various activities designed to benefit both his own particular entourage of followers and Thai society, Sam's status as a charismatic leader within the subculture is sustained and expanded, as is the reputation of Jao Mae Kuan Im's august moral virtue and efficacious power. Although not specifically discussed in the biography as I have summarized it, Sam's ongoing participation as an invited guest and supporter at the *wai khru* ceremonies of other professional spirit mediums and their voluminous and generous attendance at his *wai khru* ceremony is a frequent subject of discussion and narrative elaboration. These activities ratify and confirm Sam's ability to continually cultivate a ramifying set of social relations of alliance, support, indebtedness and patronage vis-à-vis other members of the subculture outside of his own entourage. And although not explicitly highlighted within Sam's biography, it is in fact through the mobilization of these broader social relations during his own annual *wai khru* ceremony – the single most important annual public event for any professional spirit medium – that Sam is able to successfully present himself as an authentic source of personal charismatic authority and leadership within the subculture as a whole.

Finally, the multi-year project of building a 22 meter high statue of Jao Mae Kuan Im inside the relatively modest and inconsequential Buddhist monastery in an out of the way corner

of a southern province rhetorically acts as biographical proof that Sam has become a meritorious patron of service on behalf of the wider public. The project has required securing public assistance from and alliances with an abbot as well as other monastics in addition to the bureaucratic, social and financial support of a great number of officials, workers, artists and benefactors, both in Bangkok and in the South. And the end result will be a public symbol of devotion and inspiration to faith for a larger community far from his own entourage and abode in Bangkok.

### **Conjunctural Dynamics and Structures in the Normative Career Path of a Bangkok Professional Spirit Medium**

Examining these six moments, junctures or stages within the stereotypic biographical career of a ‘typical’ accomplished Bangkok professional spirit medium through the prism of Sam’s particular biography, moreover, highlights certain underlying processual dynamics that shape the professional spirit medium’s career as a series of linked and cumulative stages of progressive elaboration. First, these six moments or junctures in a professional spirit medium’s career are strictly and necessarily sequential in only the most general sense. Everyone who wishes to claim to be a professional spirit medium must by necessity begin by grappling with and resolving those challenges contained within that first standardized moment in the typical career biography. The disturbing psychological and social impact of experiences of dissociation and possession must be ameliorated and domesticated, the possessing *jao* or *thep* must be identified and named, and a public ceremony of initiation formally and authoritatively recognizing and validating an enduring relationship with a *jao* or *thep* must occur. After this necessary first juncture in the stereotypic career biography, however, there actually exists a flexible range of



various potential trajectories and end points available to any given medium, and thus a variety of standardized potential biographical improvisations and trajectories available to any given medium.

This flexibility is most clearly revealed by the fact that many individuals within the Bangkok subculture of professional spirit mediums who are characterized, either by themselves or others, as authentically and legitimately susceptible to regular possession (“*mi ong*”) by an identifiably virtuous *jao* or *thep* do not always proceed to work through the further challenges and demands of those subsequent junctures seen as characteristic of an accomplished professional spirit medium’s normative career trajectory. Having been publicly recognized and confirmed as an authentic mediator of supramundane power and virtue, many individuals are content to limit their ongoing activities to just those modest daily, weekly and annual ceremonies of devotion and respect for their *jao* or *thep* which everyone who has accepted their calling to the role of virtuous vessel for a god must perform. These same individuals, however, decline to take up the more demanding obligations of healing the afflicted. Other individuals, by contrast, do resolve to answer the further call of their *jao* or *thep* and heal the afflicted, but limit it to only opportunistic occasions involving family and friends, resisting the demand to become an abiding regular source of refuge and protection to society in general by founding an abode, establishing an entourage and serving any and all who seek them out. Still other mediums do establish an abode and cultivate an entourage, but resist the demand to competitively establish their charisma, authority and leadership more generally within the subculture as a whole. As a result, these mediums are only modestly engaged in efforts to cultivate extensive relations of alliance, support and indebtedness with and towards either other professional spirit mediums or other religious actors such as Buddhist monks. Consequently, although the most accomplished, prestigious and

authoritative professional spirit mediums within the subculture have, by necessity, resolved successfully those specific challenges posed by each of the six junctures along the normative career path, an individual can still be recognized as an authentic professional spirit medium and vessel for the gods even if he or she has not yet advanced beyond the first juncture of the career path and even if, more importantly, he or she does not intend to advance further in the future.

Second, the successful resolution of the particular challenge posed by each moment or juncture in this overall normative trajectory of an accomplished professional spirit medium serves as a necessary foundation for further advancement along what is interpreted by members of the subculture as ideally a lifetime of deepening virtuous service to one's *jao* and *thep*. Thus, Sam did not accept the moral obligation to begin healing the afflicted until after he had first publicly accepted, and been initiated into, his new role and identity as a spirit medium. Similarly, Sam did not accept the challenge to establish an abode, begin to cultivate an entourage or pursue religious projects like building memorial statues to Jao Mae Kuan Im until after he had successfully proven that he could heal, protect and prognosticate on the behalf of suffering clients. And finally, Sam only felt confident to move to Bangkok and pursue even larger religious projects that would increase both his own fame and that of Jao Mae Kuan Im's within the subculture of professional spirit mediums (and even beyond) only after he had successfully first learned to manage an abode and an entourage and pursue less demanding non-therapeutic religious projects upcountry.

In this sense then, by both accepting and proving himself or herself basically competent at resolving the fundamental generic challenge posed by each juncture along the subculture's stereotypic career path, each medium also provides himself or herself with the necessary social and ideological resources for subsequently advancing to meet the particular challenge of the next

stereotypic career moment. Being officially recognized and initiated authorizes a medium to begin providing thaumaturgic services to clients. Successfully helping clients provides a means to cultivate individual devoted followers. Out of devoted followers emerge subordinate apprentices who require a medium to occupy the role of respected teacher. Clients, followers and students in combination constitute a medium's entourage and provide the committed support necessary to establish an abode and pursue various non-therapeutic projects. Success in establishing an abode, providing patronage and protection to one's followers and carrying out non-therapeutic religious projects, in turn, helps to facilitate the fostering of social relations of alliance, support, indebtedness and patronage with not only other professional spirit mediums (and their entourages) but also other important religious actors in the field of mainstream Thai popular religiosity such as Buddhist monks, Brahmanical experts and other religious virtuosos. And these social relations, in turn, serve to consolidate and confirm any medium's general claim to charisma, authority and leadership within the subculture and even sometimes beyond it.

Third, this segmented model of cumulative, deepening advancement along an accomplished professional spirit medium's biographical career trajectory is also dialectically recursive in its effects. Progress in successfully meeting the challenge of a later and more demanding juncture along the stereotypic career path often produces a deepening unfolding, integration and legitimation of those dimensions of the professional spirit medium's role, identity and charisma embedded in prior career junctures. Hence, there is no sense in which an aspiring medium must fully and completely resolve the challenges of one juncture before moving on to the next juncture and challenge. Thus, for example, it was only once Sam began healing people successfully that he more fully consolidated and deepened his own personal acceptance of and commitment to his new role and identity as a devoted servant of the gods. In the same way, it

was only Sam's ability to mediate successfully the healing power of Jao Mae Kuan Im which produced among his close family members an abiding social acceptance of and accommodation to his new role and identity as an authentic source of supramundane benevolent power. Similarly, the successful creation of an entourage of devoted followers who are regularly dependent upon the protective efficacy and guidance of a *jao* or *thep* consolidates and confirms on a regular basis the legitimate and efficacious therapeutic skills of healing, blessing, protection and prognostication claimed by a professional spirit medium. Achieving success as a teacher of novice mediums deepens and confirms one's identity as a source of refuge and support for devoted followers of the gods. Finally, the successful public enactment of important subculture ritual events, like the annual *wai khru* ceremony consolidates and confirms each professional spirit medium in his or her role as a leader of an entourage and within the subculture, while such leadership serves as the necessary foundation for carrying out meritorious religious activities of benefit to those outside the subculture.

Fourth and finally, there is never complete closure to or a final resolution of any of the challenges posed by each moment or juncture within the normative model of the accomplished professional spirit medium's ideal biographical career. There is never a point in an active professional spirit medium's career when, having already proven himself or herself, for example, successful as a healer of affliction, that such success can be assumed as an accepted and established social fact forever more even as he or she moves on to the challenge of subsequent junctures along the normative career path. Proving oneself to be efficacious as a successful healer does not obviate the need to continue proving – through one's daily behavior, disposition and character in and out of a state of possession – that one remains an authentic and legitimate source of benevolent virtue and supramundane power via the experience of possession. Likewise,

establishing an abode and cultivating an entourage of followers does not free a medium from the necessity of having to regularly provide successful prognostication, blessing, protection and healing to clients and followers alike. Cultivating a number of novice apprentices who look to one for guidance does not relieve a medium of the need to cultivate, support and guide followers and disciples in an ideally continually expanding circle of indebted devotees. Finally, successfully cultivating social relations of alliance, support, indebtedness and patronage with other professional spirit mediums, Buddhist monks or other individuals does not mean that a medium can neglect to cultivate, maintain and provide for his own entourage and abode and still remain successful and accomplished.

In other words, successfully meeting the challenge of each successive moment or juncture along the professional spirit medium's normative career biography simply increases the range, type and scale of those social obligations and performative achievements which a medium must be able to meet continually and successfully, day in and day out, if he or she wishes to at least preserve, much less increase, his or her charisma, authority, authenticity and legitimacy within the subculture as whole, as well as among his or her followers and clients more narrowly. Moreover, progress in successfully advancing through these six foundational moments or junctures along the career path also paradoxically exposes every medium to an expanding range of potential risks to the continued preservation of his or her relative prestige, status, charisma and authority as well. This risk is a consequence of the fact that any repeated failure to successfully meet the expected demands of each juncture's respective obligations can potentially expose a medium to criticisms, gossip or disrepute among knowledgeable others within the subculture such as suspicious or resentful rather than deferential peers, doubting or critical rather than devoted followers, or skeptical and dismissive rather than satisfied clients.

The status and prestige of any accomplished professional spirit medium is measured, in part, by his or her ability to craft a biography which touches on and persuasively addresses through compelling biographical elaborations all of these discrete junctures within the subculture's standard career trajectory. Often these elaborations are most compellingly presented by actors within the subculture – mediums and followers predominantly, but sometimes clients as well – through oral or written narratives which are dramatically presented before interested and intrigued audiences. These narratives typically focus upon past miraculous and dramatic events, moments or encounters that reveal the authority, authenticity and efficacy of mediums as devout and virtuous servants of supramundane *jao* and *thep*. In addition, however, these elaborations upon a medium's ultimately successful conformity to an overarching if general biographical career trajectory are also implicitly conveyed through certain non-narrative techniques. The non-narrative techniques include the symbolic character and form of various social practices (including, but not limited to, ritual practices) and the symbolic character and form of a medium's physical presence in the world (including, but again not limited to, the attire they wear and the architecture and iconography of their abodes).

In order to claim persuasively and authoritatively the social role, personal identity and authentic charisma of a professional spirit medium, any individual medium must possess the ability to cultivate persuasive biographical elaborations of public success and exemplary accomplishment that address each of those foundational challenges that constitute the six moments or junctures along the stereotypic career model of an accomplished spirit medium. Moreover, these biographical elaborations are most persuasive if they simultaneously employ communicative techniques in multiple, overlapping modes – i.e. through narratives, practices and physical presence – and if they successfully integrate these modes and moments into a coherent,

cohesive and acceptable whole. As a result, professional spirit mediums who lack either the knowledge, skill or confidence necessary to produce and reproduce, day in and day out, authoritative and compelling biographical improvisations in any of these modalities or regarding expectations associated with any of these junctures inevitably risk challenges to their authenticity and efficacy, as well as a potential decline in their relative authority and charisma among clients, followers and allies within or outside the subculture. The relative supramundane authenticity, charismatic authority, and religious legitimacy of any particular medium, therefore, depends upon just how enduringly persuasive, compelling and accepted various distinct audiences find these biographical elaborations and improvisations as either narrative, practice or presence.

In the end, therefore, the overarching stereotypic biographical career of the accomplished professional spirit medium, and the discrete segmented moments or junctures which constitute it, exists as a shared moral standard which mediums and others within the subculture employ to interpret, evaluate and judge the day-to-day actions and experiences of not only themselves but other actors within the subculture as well. It constitutes part of the implicit vocabulary of motivations and goals, achievements and failures which informs how those within the subculture of professional spirit mediums think about themselves and others both within the subculture and even beyond it. Criticism and praise of mediums within the subculture is framed frequently in terms of this segmented stereotypic biographical career and the degree to which individuals are perceived as either conforming to or deviating from the expected normative resolution of the distinct challenges underlying each juncture. Mediums who fail to present themselves regularly as authentically possessed, as capable of providing efficacious thaumaturgic assistance to those in need, as capable of cultivating and patronizing an entourage of followers, as capable of expertly guiding novice mediums, as capable of establishing enduring social ties of alliance,

support and indebtedness with other mediums, or as capable of creating and mobilizing religious allies outside the subculture are subject potentially to criticism and gossip by individuals within the subculture. Conversely, those who regularly succeed at these same tasks receive praise and valorization.

Consequently, an understanding and acceptance of, and familiarity with, this model of the ideal accomplished medium's life and experiences constitutes one of the most centrally defining cultural elements which distinguishes the beliefs, practices, experiences and identities of members of the subculture from those who are either uninterested in or critical of this form of possession and mediumship, and its associated forms of charismatic authority and religious practice. That this stereotypic biographical career path constitutes a generally shared normative standard is evident, at one level, by its influence in shaping the substantive content of praise and criticism within the subculture. Much of the competition within the subculture between mediums, entourages and abodes for relative prestige, influence, power and presence centers precisely, in fact, on confirming or contesting – either directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly – the terms, meanings or implications of events contained within a professional spirit medium's biographical self-representation and self-understanding. And often this praise or criticism centers on whether a particular medium is really authentically possessed, is really efficacious as a healer or prognosticator, is really benevolent as a guardian and source of refuge, is really wise as a teacher, is really a charismatic leader beyond his entourage, or is really a virtuous patron of Buddhist merit-making projects.

At yet another level, moreover, the salience of this stereotypic career path as a generally shared normative standard is also evident by the fact that those individuals I met in Bangkok who experience possession by *jao* and *thep* and thus are identified as professional spirit mediums, but



who have not fully progressed through the total career path, typically felt the need to explain to me why they had not advanced. For those who did not desire to progress further along the stereotypic career trajectory of a professional spirit medium, their justifications frequently turned on rhetorical variations on the theme that their personality, life circumstances and/or karmic heritage prevented them from fully embracing the more demanding life of an accomplished professional spirit medium, and that such limitations had been accepted by their possessing *jao* or *thep* as either a temporary or a permanent condition of constraint. For those who actively desired to progress further along the normative career path lying before them but had not yet done so, their justifications for why they were being held back frequently relied upon explanations about how either their abilities had not matured enough yet, their moral virtue was still insufficient, or they had not yet been given permission by more senior authorities – such as their *jao*, *thep* or *khru* – to advance further. In both cases, however, there was a need for those still located in only the early stages of the normative career path to justify why they had not yet fully embraced the expected next set of responsibilities and practices presumed to characterize the life of a fully accomplished professional spirit medium.

Consequently, I argue, this ideal of the professional spirit medium's stereotypic biographical career path and its normative value within the subculture is not simply an analytic artifact of my anthropological interpretation and analysis, but rather an immediate and recognizable model of being and action for those Thai individuals actively engaged with and invested in the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediumship. Within the subculture, however, this model is not explicitly presented as a formal set of junctures and roles, challenges and accomplishments as I have outlined it here. This model is, rather, implicit and informal, and thus constitutes a widely shared and agreed upon, yet non-systematized and non-reified, set of

norms, expectations and presumptions which are most typically instantiated by most members of the subculture through various forms of embodied knowledge, value and practice within the subculture as a whole.

### **The Analytic Significance of the Professional Spirit Medium's Biographical Career**

It is common in the anthropological literature to envision the process of becoming a spirit medium as involving the socialization of an individual into a new social role and personal identity.<sup>182</sup> Individuals who experience disruptive and confusing states of dissociation and who display behavior which is understood in a particular cultural setting as conforming to accepted expectations regarding authentic possession by a benevolent supramundane entity are subsequently ascribed by socially significant individuals within their social environment with the role and identity of a novice spirit medium. If these individuals afflicted with dissociation and unconventional behavior, in turn, accept this attribution of spirit possession, they then often proceed through a long process of trial and error to learn to become proficient and persuasive at meeting and displaying those general normative expectations regarding public behavior, goals, desires, and presentation of self required by this new role and identity. Moreover, if this socialization into a new public role and identity is to be considered true and authentic, rather than merely strategic and deceptive, this process of learning and socialization is understood as requiring an enduring transformation in an individual's personal identity and subjectivity, in their very somatic, affective and cognitive orientation towards the social world and action within it.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Some classic statements in this regard include Bourguignon 1965, Lewis 1971, Lambek 1981, Obeyesekere 1981, Irvine 1982, Nuckolls 1991, Lambek 1993. More recent analyses which explore this issue with regards to theories of interactive and situated social learning include Goldman 2007, Lambek 2007, Vasconcelos 2007, Halloy 2012, Halloy and Naumescu 2012, Naumescu 2012, Ram 2012, Santo 2012.

<sup>183</sup> This basic narrative of socialization via learning to become a spirit medium has been described broadly across various cultures, regions and religious formations. Some representative examples can be found in Crapanzano and

This process of learning and socialization is analyzed often as progressing under the tutelage of a more senior spirit medium as well as perhaps within the context of a larger group or collectivity of other individuals – including other novices – who also regularly experience states of spirit possession and thus must learn how to interpret and make meaningful sense of this experience. Rituals of initiation at various stages in this process of role acquisition are treated in the anthropological literature as both markers of successful socialization into this new social role and identity and as a key technique of praxis through which those very transformations in subjectivity, personhood, role and identity that characterize successful socialization are produced.<sup>184</sup>

In general, the anthropological literature typically considers an individual to have successfully learned, and thus been socialized into, the new public role and identity of a spirit medium once a series of relatively discrete and specific changes in behavior, personhood, subjectivity and the presentation of self are socially and publicly achieved and recognized. Thus, typically the initially chaotic experience and behavior of dissociation and trance must be replaced by, and transformed into, a more controlled and moderated mode of dissociation and trance that facilitates culturally recognizable and valued modes of behavior and communication – verbal or otherwise – that are identified, within the culture under question, as signifying acceptable interactions by a supramundane entity with humans. In addition, the originally

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Garrison 1977, Lambek 1981, Body 1989, Wafer 1991, Wolf 1992, Sharp 1993, Masquelier 2001, Lovell 2002, Mason 2002. A promising rethinking and reconceptualization of this basic trajectory and dynamic in social learning and identity construction which seeks to integrate physiological, psychological, social and cultural dimensions in a general etiology of mediumship that avoids the rhetoric of pathology while acknowledging the agency of individuals in the transformation of their own identities can be found in the various studies of Seligman (2005a, 2005b, 2012).

<sup>184</sup> The classic account of ritual as socialization in this vein is, of course, Van Gennep 1960 [1909]. A more recent general discussion of rites of initiation as a uniquely productive and salient technique of social learning and entry into a social identity is Schwartz and Merten 1968. The presumption that a single or series of guided rituals of initiation in the context of a cult of affliction serves as a, or even the, key point of social entry into the new role of spirit medium for those suffering from dissociation is implicit and widespread in the anthropological literature on spirit possession and mediumship.

inchoate and unidentifiable persona of the supramundane entity possessing the individual must become coherent, consistent and identifiable as a discrete and distinct locus of agency, volition and desire within the terms of the local cosmology under question. Likewise, successful socialization into the role and identity of a spirit medium is also frequently linked to the ability of an individual to effectively interact in a meaningful manner while in a state of possession with other individuals, especially individuals who are not themselves in a state of possession. Frequently, this type of social interaction takes the form of providing persuasive and successful thaumaturgic or miraculous assistance while in a state of dissociation and trance to other social actors, some of whom directly request this assistance and some who do not. Consequently, successfully becoming a spirit medium is analyzed most typically in the anthropological literature as success at socialization into a new role and identity, and this success is interpreted as an accomplishment in learning to produce and enact culturally specific types of behavior, personas and social interactions that are identified in the culture under question as indications of authentic spirit possession and mediumship.

Significantly then, the process of becoming a spirit medium has been treated in the anthropological literature as a process of socialization into a particular role and identity, and frequently this socialization is treated implicitly as having a more or less clearly defined moment of arrival and completion. An individual is typically understood as having achieved this role and identity, this form of personhood and subjectivity in a more or less sharply defined moment in time associated with formal and culturally valorized rites of initiation. Additionally, most anthropological analyses and interpretations of the process of becoming a spirit medium focus primarily on those earliest stages in a spirit medium's career when an individual is first learning to persuasively embody, produce and display not only a culturally authentic mode of

dissociation, trance and possession but also a culturally valued and meaningful mode of social interaction with other individuals, both possessed and not possessed. Hence, the social learning leading up to and around ritual moments of initiation typically have been emphasized in anthropological analyses. Likewise, analyses of either the performative failure to successfully achieve this role and identity early in a career (Wolf 1990) or of the performative failure to continue to successfully reproduce this role and identity later in a career (Schieffelin 1996) both treat such performative failures as examples of an unsuccessful socialization into, or reproduction of, the role and identity of a spirit medium, and this role and identity is interpreted and analyzed most typically as singular in character. Commonly, therefore, the words and actions of individuals claiming to be possessed are interpreted by anthropologists as either succeeding or failing at embodying and enacting – in a publicly and culturally persuasive, recognizable and compelling manner – that singular role and identity of a spirit medium as it is locally understood in the society in question.

The analytic value of conceptualizing a Thai professional spirit medium's biography, experience, behavior and practice as guided by and modeled upon a stereotypic normative career trajectory composed of six distinct junctures, however, is that this perspective allows one to re-theorize the process of becoming a spirit medium as a more complex, differentiated and nuanced process of cumulative socialization and learning. Likewise, the successful performative enactment of spirit possession and mediumship is also conceptualized accordingly as a more complex, differentiated and nuanced process in the public presentation of self as well. From the analytic perspective of a segmented stereotypic career trajectory, the process of becoming a spirit medium is envisioned more appropriately instead as the progressive and cumulative mastering of a set of relatively discrete, yet interrelated, basic roles and identities. In the context of Thai

professional spirit mediumship, therefore, what is often perceived in the singular as the role and identity of the professional spirit medium can be disaggregated analytically, instead, into a set of six relatively distinct subordinate roles, each emergent out of the six junctures in the professional spirit medium's typical normative career trajectory. The more accomplished, prestigious and successful professional spirit mediums, from this perspective, represent those individuals who have learned to regularly, proficiently and persuasively carry out three tasks: to narrate, embody and enact all of these relatively distinct subordinate roles; to satisfy a more diverse range of specific expectations associated with each of these particular subordinate roles; and to integrate more persuasively each of these subordinate roles into a more encompassing and persistent public presentation of self, personhood and subjectivity that conforms to those general behavioral and normative ideals of the 'typical' exemplary professional spirit medium accepted within the subculture as a whole.<sup>185</sup>

From this perspective, therefore, successfully meeting the challenge of each of the six defining junctures within the normative career trajectory of the contemporary Thai professional spirit medium demands that an individual learn to become accomplished in a different type of role and identity, a different schema of personhood and subjectivity, each of which is interpreted

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<sup>185</sup> Even greater refinement in mapping and analyzing the learning of these various roles and identities across the normative career trajectory of Thai professional spirit mediums can be achieved by integrating models of differential competency and virtuosity in contextualized human learning into the discussion of becoming a professional spirit medium. One fruitful possibility is the Dreyfus phenomenological model of phases in the proficient learning of skills which maps recognizable, qualitatively distinct ways of acting and performing in the process of learning along a spectrum of positions of competency, beginning with the status of novice and potentially proceeding through the statuses of advanced beginner, competent performer, proficient performer, and finally expert. See the discussion in Flyvbjerg 2001: 9-24. Through such distinctions one can observe more clearly how particular individuals are more or less competent at different roles and identities that in combination constitute the idealized career path, and thus analyze how this uneven distribution of competencies shapes not only their own progression along the career path but also the character and dynamics of their interactions with others within the subculture, especially other professional spirit mediums who display their own particular mix of competencies and learning. In addition, even greater refinement could be achieved by recognizing and investigating the differing spectrum of motivational investment and social identification at play in any particular medium's enactment of the various subordinate roles and identities constituting the stereotypic career path. I discuss this dimension of selective and differential competency at various points in the remainder of this chapter.

by members of the subculture as one important dimension or modality of an authentic and authoritative professional spirit medium's total experience and behavior. Each juncture along the career path constitutes a new and cumulative challenge in proving oneself proficient at a new form of role-taking and role-making. Thus, the first juncture on the career path challenges an individual to learn to embody the identity and enact the role of a virtuous vessel – and authentic and authoritative receptacle, source and mediator of transcendent virtue and supramundane presence and power. The second juncture along the professional spirit medium's stereotypic career path challenges an individual to learn to embody the identity and enact the role of an authentic and efficacious therapist – someone capable of providing supramundane protection and assistance on behalf of the afflicted. The third juncture along this career path challenges an individual to embody the identity and enact the role of an authentic and benevolent guardian to his or her collective entourage of disciples, followers and clients. The fourth juncture challenges someone to embody the identity and enact the role of an authentic and respected teacher – a generous mentor to apprentices requiring instruction and training. The fifth juncture challenges someone to embody the identity and enact the role of an authentic and charismatic leader both of an entourage and on behalf of a wider community of deferential ritual and subcultural peers. And the sixth juncture challenges an individual to embody the identity and enact the role of an authentic and meritorious patron – someone invested in and oriented towards good works on behalf of the wider world through productive relations with collegial allies beyond the subculture.

Consequently, Thai individuals who claim to be possessed by *jao* and *thep* in the mode of contemporary professional spirit mediums are not simply being socialized into a single role and identity. Rather, progression along the normative career trajectory of the professional spirit

medium constitutes a social process of sequential and cumulative role-taking and role-making in a deepening fashion more properly described as role redefinition, acquisition and expansion.<sup>186</sup> Moreover, once any professional spirit medium has advanced successfully beyond that first crucial juncture, his or her daily life inevitably entails the challenge of juggling and integrating this expanding repertoire of relatively discrete roles and identities, as well as performatively managing this feat of articulation persuasively across a growing diversity of social contexts and amidst an expanding diversity of audiences that reflect distinct and even sometimes conflicting interests and needs.

Although these distinct roles as virtuous receptacle of alterity, efficacious therapist of suffering, benevolent guardian of devoted followers, respected teacher of subordinate apprentices, charismatic leader of loyal dependents and deferential peers, and meritorious patron juggling collegial allies – and the concomitant forms of identity and subjectivity associated with them – ideally resonate with and reinforce each other in practice, they each nonetheless also demand a distinct set of skills, proficiencies and knowledge. Thus, it is not always the case that a medium has mastered successfully each of these roles to the same degree nor equally identifies with and feels comfortable in the responsibilities and expectations concomitant with each of these roles. As a result, a medium's progression through the junctures of his or her career path often, at least initially, can foster feelings of uncertainty, ambivalence, self-doubt and even resistance or denial, although these feelings tend to be hidden from public view except at the very beginning of the experience of spirit possession. The most successful professional spirit

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<sup>186</sup> Role-taking and role-making conventionally have been more systematically analyzed within the interactionist theorizing of sociology. This analytic perspective includes theoretical approaches such as symbolic interactionism and dramaturgy as well as structural role theory and process role theory. See Turner 1991: 367-486. Narrower, more substantively focused sociological discussions of the analytic complexities involved in the affective, transactional, symbolic, social and ecological dynamics of role-taking and role-making can be found in Hewitt 1991, Burr 2002 and especially Turner 2002.



mediums, however, achieve a considerable degree of competency, proficiency and ease at enacting with regularity and persuasiveness each of these subordinate roles, or else they learn to downplay or displace onto others the expectations and responsibilities accompanying those particular subordinate roles at which they are less proficient.

From a more expansive structural and transactional perspective, however, successfully navigating the challenges of each juncture along this career path entails more for a professional spirit medium than simply proving himself or herself proficient and persuasive as a supramundane vessel, therapist, guardian, teacher, leader and patron. Rather, each subordinate role and identity that mediums learn to enact and embody is part of a larger dyadic role set, and in each juncture along their career path the complete set of transactionally interdependent roles for both ego and alter must necessarily be produced and reproduced in a persuasive and compelling manner. Hence, professional spirit mediums cannot enact and embody the role and identity of a virtuous receptacle of transcendent alterity, cannot produce themselves as authentically possessed individuals, without also simultaneously producing a persona which is accepted and validated publicly by others, most especially other – ideally senior – professional spirit mediums, as an authentic *jao* or *thep*. Likewise, a professional medium cannot successfully enact the role and embody the identity of a benevolent therapist without also simultaneously producing satisfied, laudatory clients. In the same sense, in order to be recognized as a benevolent guardian and source of refuge, a medium must be able to cultivate and maintain a retinue of loyal and devoted followers and disciples. Claiming to be a respected teacher requires the cultivation of subordinate apprentices, while success as a charismatic leader demands the creation of a diverse set of deferential peers and colleagues. Finally, mediums cannot become meritorious patrons without simultaneously bringing into creation a collection of collegial and

supportive authoritative figures from outside the subculture. In this sense, therefore, every professional spirit medium's claim to a particular subordinate role and identity, and their associated authenticity and authority, is dialectically dependent upon the production and reproduction of a set of social alters who comprise the other half of a given pair of formal roles.

Ethnographically based analytic attention to the rhetorical claims, social labor and emotional work of everyday life within the entourage of Bangkok professional spirit mediums, moreover, reveals that much of the activities of mediums is focused on initiating, managing and securing a series of coordinated transformations through which the necessary social others within each role set is produced. Thus, in order to become a virtuous vessel, inchoate and threatening dissociation must be transformed into virtuous divine alterity and the inattention of other mediums must be converted into affirming social recognition. The status of an efficacious therapist requires the transformation of suffering clients into felicitous clients full of well-being. In order to become a benevolent guardian, skeptical and diffident or happy but non-committed clients and believers must become devoted and loyal followers and disciples. The social reality of the respected teacher is only secured once ambivalent, reluctant or resistant juniors are turned into indebted, subordinate apprentices. The achievement of being recognized as a charismatic leader within the subculture and beyond the social limits of the entourage is only secured by transforming suspicious and wary competitors into deferential and supportive peers. And finally, the social reality of establishing oneself as a meritorious patron is only achievable once distant, unengaged or doubtful virtuous authorities outside the subculture are turned into collegial collaborators who either accept one's offers of assistance or even better yet seek it out independently. Beyond and behind the exotic spectacle of possession and ritual, this transformative work upon the social relations within which professional spirit mediums are

embedded, and upon which they are dependent, constitutes the principal symbolic and social labor and concerns of any given medium. And it is out of the seemingly mundane and trivial demands and challenges of such labor that the foundation of their religious and charismatic authority is ultimately grounded.

These various acts reveal the fundamentally social, distributed, and transactional character of every professional spirit medium's claim to supramundane authenticity, charismatic authority and religious legitimacy. Becoming a medium is a thoroughly collaborative venture in the fashioning and refashioning of religious identity, personhood and subjectivity within the subculture. And given the fundamentally non-institutionalized nature of any professional spirit medium's claim to identity and authority, it is also a fundamentally fragile venture which must be attended to diligently and regularly if it is to succeed. Becoming an accomplished professional spirit medium therefore entails more than simply the socialization of one individual into a particular trajectory of interrelated roles and identities. It also entails the socialization of a much wider range of other social actors into a range of similarly diverse roles and identities – mentors, clients, followers, apprentices, peers, and allies – which they will come to feel invested in and committed to maintaining on their own on either a short-term or a long-term basis. Thus, in becoming authentically charismatic and authoritative within the subculture, professional spirit mediums must seek to not only fashion and refashion their own moods, motivations and perceptions through the assistance and guidance of numerous other key social actors. In addition, mediums must also seek to fashion and refashion the desires, experiences and self-understandings of those other individuals they regularly and intensively interact with so that they conform to those particular roles and identities which complement and confirm the mediums'

own understandings and evaluations of themselves as legitimate, charismatic and efficacious religious actors.

The distributed and social nature of charismatic authenticity and authority with the subculture as an intersubjective accomplishment is highlighted, in fact, by the crucial legitimating role played by other actors in securing the medium's progress through the various junctures of the stereotypic normative career path in two senses. First, spontaneous and unsolicited social recognition and attributions of appropriate conduct and character by third parties are crucial if a medium wishes to successfully progress along the normative career path. An incipient medium with a propensity towards dissociative trance should not in principle be able to self-identify which *jao* or *thep* are descending to possess him or her. Likewise, a medium cannot simply declare he or she has successfully healed a client of a chronic illness or accurately predicted future events. Rather, within the logic of the subculture other social actors who lack any prior affiliation or commitment to the medium should confirm that a medium is a servant of this particular god or that the medium has miraculously healed this particular affliction or foreseen that particular future event. Hence, the positive testimonials of clients, devoted members of the subculture, other mediums, and monks and Brahmins who were previously strangers or even unknown to the medium are ideologically and rhetorically crucial in buttressing the public claims of competency by mediums that they are authentic and legitimate vessels, therapists, guardians, teachers, leaders and patrons.

Second, the ability of a medium to meet the obligations of any of the subordinate roles upon the stereotypic career path is fundamentally reliant upon the collaborative social work of those role set alter egos that shadow the progress of the competently accomplished professional spirit medium. Although often in their own eyes and those who are assisting them the

achievements of a medium are perceived as solely the result of his or her efforts in conjunction with the interventions of *jao* or *thep*, from a sociological perspective mediums are utterly and ultimately fully dependent upon a wide diversity of typically unrecognized social labor if they are to effectively embody and inhabit their various roles and responsibilities. Thus, due to the reality of dissociation itself, the social reality of their experience of possession is only retrievable through the subsequent recuperative narratives circulated back to them by a variety of witnesses such as other mediums initially and later on principally assistants, followers and disciples, as well as clients, peers and allied associates. Similarly, the production of therapeutic assistance in its full performative enactment relies upon the elaborately choreographed social work of assistants and followers who orient and prepare clients about techniques, expectations and subcultural frames and meanings before they begin their consultations with the possessed medium and who then afterwards provide explanations, translations and assistance in understanding and implementing the finer details of the advice and directions provided by the *jao* and *thep*. Mediums as benevolent guardians and sources of refuge must rely upon not only the formal assistance of followers, but also the sustained, incremental and frequent informal social labor of assistants, disciples, and followers who help to carry out many of the daily tasks, both mundane and extraordinary, necessary for an abode to function on a daily basis as an ongoing social enterprise. Offerings need to be made, provisions need to be purchased, meals need to be cooked, and payments and donations need to be collected, for example. Similarly, the preparations for a *wai khru* ceremony or a forest robe donation are intensive and extensive, and in this process a wide range of activities and labor needs to be identified, mobilized, coordinated and performed. An individual medium on his or her own could not meet these needs. All of this social labor that exists backstage and out of public sight, or which is sidelined or rendered

invisible by the dramatic performative presence of a medium in a state of possession, however, is foundational ultimately to the ability of any medium to successfully lay claim to any particular role and identity along the subculture's normative stereotypic career path and the charismatic authority flowing from those roles and identities.

Focusing on an individual's ability to embody and enact a series of subordinate roles and identities also has the additional value of demystifying the charismatic religious authority of a professional spirit medium as a radically extraordinary social affair. By showing how charismatic religious authority emerges out of more than just the persuasive public performance of the role of a virtuous vessel, one disrupts a fixation on dissociation, trance, and the spectacle of possession as the ultimate and determining ground of the religious authority of spirit mediums. Although claims to authentic possession are performatively important in the enactment of the various subordinate roles that together constitute the professional spirit medium's typical career path, they are not the only or even necessarily at times the most central issue in whether or not a medium can persuasively claim to be a competent therapist, guardian, teacher, leader or patron. Many activities and much social labor beyond the frames of trance possession and even ritual performance in general are foundationally crucial in successfully enacting these various roles and identities. Moreover, because these roles and identities are generic and widely distributed across the social landscape of Thai society, it is clear that in successfully enacting them mediums are relying upon schemas of joint action and scripts of interpretation that are not dependent upon the presence of ideas of trance and possession in particular or the framing logics of Buddhism or religiosity in general. Rather, they are relying upon schemas and scripts, norms and values, models of moral personhood and authority that, while inflected through both general

Buddhist idioms and even more specific subcultural expectations, are nonetheless broadly shared across Thai society.

In this sense, the cultural foundations of charismatic religious authority within the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums reside in profoundly generic social and cultural forms that transcend the logics of either Buddhist religiosity or the exotic spectacle of dissociation, trance, possession and mediumship. And this foundation in general ideas about the proper way to be normative therapist, guardian, teacher, leader or patron in Thai society is one of the principle reasons why and how newcomers to the subculture are able to relatively easily understand and negotiate communication, interactions and expectations with those more established members of the entourages and social networks that make up the subculture. It also explains how newcomers can so easily recognize, endorse, support and gain social value and personal pragmatic benefit from the forms of religious authority performatively enacted within the social and ritual life of the subculture.

In sum, therefore, the analytic value of interpretively unpacking the experience and practice of spirit possession in this manner is that it facilitates a clearer sense of the characteristic sociological, transactional and phenomenological contours of each of those distinct performative moments and elements of role and identity which in combination comprise the daily reality of spirit mediumship as a sociocultural phenomenon. This approach also allows the analyst to more carefully examine how those distinct performative moments and elements within a spirit medium's claim to identity and authority are linked both biographically and processually in practice through the different narratives and actions of spirit mediums, their supporters and their critics. In addition, this approach also allows the analyst to avoid an excessive focus upon trance, dissociation and ritual possession as the central phenomenological experience or cultural ground

out of which authority and legitimacy is fashioned in the subculture. Moments of success and moments of failure in either becoming or maintaining one's identity and status as an authentic, charismatic spirit medium also are illuminated with a more precise and discriminating light. And as a consequence, the analyst can examine with a greater degree of precision how spirit mediums can succeed partially, fail partially and even simultaneously both succeed and fail once analytically distinct components of their charismatic authority, presence and identity are disaggregated properly.

### **The Moral Meaning and Experience of Mediumship and the Cultivation of Character and Personhood Along the Career Path**

From the perspective of professional spirit mediums themselves, movement into and through each juncture along their stereotypic normative career trajectory is experienced as both the unfolding of a hidden destiny and the realization of predictions and prognostications made to them by their possessing *jao* and *thep*. Likewise, the learning and mastery of new career roles and identities, or the intensification and expansion of responsibilities and expectations associated with already learned roles and identities, is interpreted as the uncovering of new facets of character and personality. Within the subculture these social-cum-personal developments are framed as meaningful reflections of a larger, wider and more complete virtuous potentiality and destiny that is awaiting them in the future and which is a result of their past meritorious actions, either in this or a previous life. Similarly, a lack of progress along the subculture's normative career trajectory or setbacks in fulfilling particular responsibilities and obligations associated with any of their career roles and identities are experienced frequently by mediums as instructive



lessons passed on by their *jao* or *thep*, lessons that will foster in them greater moral understanding and virtue which will, in turn, undergird anticipated future progress.

Both of these contrasting interpretations and experiences of incremental or delayed progress upon the presumed normative career path are exemplified vividly through the numerous and often repeated biographical tales of both miraculous success and exasperating tribulation that mediums and their followers frequently share among themselves and with clients. In all of these narratives there exists an underlying thematic rhetoric which frames the ultimate meaning and significance of all types of success and tribulation as residing in an attitude of bearing witness to the transcendent volition, desires, virtue and wisdom of *jao* and *thep*, regardless of how inscrutable, demanding or perplexing their behavior or desires may appear to humans at any given moment. In response to this moral and even existential challenge by *jao* or *thep*, mediums actively cultivate within themselves, and seek to foster within their clients and followers as well, an abiding faith in and devotion to the supramundane and radically transformative power, influence, efficacy and wisdom of their possessing *jao* and *thep* in particular, but also of all authentic and virtuous *jao* and *thep* as well. Mediums also seek to cultivate an appreciation for the sometimes unforeseen moral value and pragmatic benefits resulting from actions by a *jao* or *thep*, actions that from another perspective can seem instead like simply the frustratingly disruptive eruptions of a *jao* or *thep*'s supramundane desires, prohibitions or goals into the narrow interests and concerns of mundane human needs and expectations. Accordingly, the burdens and demands of directly, selflessly and actively serving supramundane beings like *jao* and *thep* are emphasized repeatedly by professional spirit mediums as they recount in considerable detail how difficult it has been to meet the past demands of their *jao* or *thep* or how demanding it will be in the future to satisfy their recent commands. The personal and social costs

of serving one's possessing *jao* and *thep* is, therefore, a very common topic of discussion among mediums, serving as a balancing foci to the more celebratory tales and experiences of miraculous benefits and moral uplift which constitute an opposing pole within an implicit subcultural discourse focusing on the demanding life of the professional spirit medium as a life of witnessing.

More specifically, however, mediums experience progress along the subculture's normative career path and success in learning successfully to enact and embody specific career roles and identities as an intimate personal response of conscious submission to specific authoritative, compelling and often repeated demands made upon them by their possessing *jao* and *thep*. The motivating force pushing a medium along and through the stereotypic career path of the professional spirit medium is almost always interpreted by a medium and his followers as a compelling, direct and personal demand directed at the medium by his or her possessing *jao* or *thep*. These demands by a *jao* or *thep* typically convey a desire that the medium increase, deepen or expand his or her level of commitment to and identification with the various roles and practices of mediumship, either by advancing further along a currently uncompleted career trajectory or by adding further discrete projects, obligations and responsibilities to those subordinate roles and identities already competently mastered by the medium. Frequently considerable time, attention and talk within the lives of mediums and their entourages is occupied with either deciphering and translating these demands and requests or reflecting on and perfecting the character of one's response to these demands and requests.<sup>187</sup> In the end, however,

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<sup>187</sup> An implicit and unstated criteria of progression along the normative career trajectory of professional spirit mediumship concerns the character of this communication between possessing *jao* or *thep* and a medium, both regarding its communicative clarity and its ease of interpretation. Generally speaking, novice mediums tend to receive unclear, partial and difficult to interpret communications from their possessing *jao* or *thep*, while individuals who have not yet accepted their status as professional spirit mediums and undergone an initiation ceremony (*phithi rap khan*) are defined in large part by the general communicative inarticulateness and even incomprehensibility of the messages they receive from their possessing *jao* and *thep*. In addition, the more accomplished professional

all of these compelling demands and requests, as well as progress along the career path, are interpreted within the subculture as benign efforts by the *jao* and *thep* to cultivate a deepening exemplification, within a Buddhist-themed rhetoric, of virtuous submission, exemplary morality, benevolent compassion and liberating wisdom within the lives of their mediums.

Just as importantly, however, advancement along the stereotypic career path and its expanding repertoire of career roles and identities is also interpreted within the subculture as the consequence of a medium increasingly recognizing and accepting an already existing state of moral indebtedness to, as well as affiliation and identification with, the transcendent moral presence and agency of *jao* and *thep*. This fact is most clearly reflected in cases in which the onset of possession in an individual accompanies or soon follows a recovery from a life-threatening illness, which is treated accordingly as a sign that the *jao* or *thep* saved that individual from imminent death. This same sentiment of indebtedness and affiliation is also reflected in the commonly asserted belief within the subculture that current mediums were relatives, friends or peers with the *jao* or *thep* in a previous lifetime, and thus partners in the *jao* or *thep*'s moral endeavors across an expanse of time broader than just this particular lifetime. The cultural rhetoric of both of these interpretations, regardless of the particularities of their substantive content, serve to reframe the social and personal disruptions typically associated with the onset and subsequent experience of possession as really, in fact, a return to a more foundational and authentic, if previously hidden and unknown, mode of being and form of personal identity on the part of the medium. In this sense, the past history of a medium in this

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mediums are perceived to be able to understand and interpret communication from their possessing *jao* and *thep* without the assistance of anyone else. Novice mediums, however, are perceived to frequently require the assistance of more experienced and accomplished mediums. Individuals who have not yet undergone an initiation ceremony, on the other hand, experience this communication from their possessing *jao* or *thep* as utterly incomprehensible without the assistance of more accomplished mediums, and it is this task of communicative translation and interpretation, in fact, that fundamentally defines the hierarchical relationship of mentorship between senior mediums and those at the initial stage of the career path seeking the relief and clarification of ritual initiation.

lifetime prior to embarking on his or her new career is reconceptualized by those within the subculture as an inauthentic and even false life and history, as a trivial, deceptive and deluded form of moral existence that cloaked a more abiding and authentic character and identity which is only now being revealed and embraced in the course of those inevitable struggles and triumphs that typically are seen to characterize the life of the average professional spirit medium.

Not surprisingly then, becoming a professional spirit medium and progressing along its stereotypic normative career path is not experienced by mediums themselves as an exercise in learning a new set of roles or forms of identity despite what the analytic language of social science might seem to indicate. The idea that they are playing a role or performing an identity is explicitly disparaged by professional spirit mediums precisely because such a rhetoric of interpretation carries strong connotations of artifice and fabrication. This disparagement is especially strong when this rhetoric is used to describe the actual practice and experience of possession itself.<sup>188</sup> Rather, these transformative events are experienced instead by mediums as involving a fundamental and thorough-going transformation in their essential subjectivity and personhood, in their very foundational self-understanding of who they are, what goals they should direct themselves toward, how they should view and interpret their surrounding material and social world, and what issues and concerns really matter in their daily life. This reconceptualization and revaluation of themselves as a virtuous moral agent and person, therefore, entails a fundamental reframing of not only who they are now, but of who they were in the past and who they will become in the future. And once they have recognized and accepted this new role and identity as a professional spirit medium – even if it does not become their primary public role and identity – these individuals also logically open themselves up to the

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<sup>188</sup> This rhetoric of performance and artifice is, however, quite consciously deployed by critics of professional spirit mediums – and any form of mediumship in general – who seek to expose the belief and practice of it as a form of deception and deceit.

possibility of further ongoing reconceptualizations of their identity, subjectivity and personhood in the future as well.

This transformation and reconceptualization of their essential subjectivity and personhood, moreover, is not simply an act of fate and destiny that overtakes and reshapes them as if they are inert clay. Rather, accomplished professional spirit mediums themselves are self-conscious of the degree to which their acceptance and embrace of their supramundane moral indebtedness, obligations and calling entails an active response of personal moral self-cultivation as well. Professional spirit mediums, accordingly, often claim to feel a strong need to cultivate within themselves – through acts of devotion, sacrifice and discipline – a morally virtuous personality and character that is properly befitting of the elevated and august moral status of those *jao* and *thep* who regularly descend into the world and temporarily inhabit their bodies. The general personal temperament, disposition and behavioral habits professional spirit mediums ideally strive to cultivate within themselves are, moreover, strikingly reminiscent of those traits ideally exemplified by the most prestigious and virtuous category of religious actors within the system of Thai religiosity, Buddhist monks. Thus, the most accomplished professional spirit mediums, like extraordinarily devoted lay Buddhists in general who seek to approximate the ideal ascetic lifestyle of proper monks (Stengs 2002), typically seek to cultivate within themselves and to publicly display to others a specific range of normatively exemplary Buddhist personal character traits such as benevolence, compassion, generosity, equanimity, restraint, humility, and wisdom.

These efforts at self-cultivation, however, reveal certain incipient tensions of ideology and practice within the phenomenon of contemporary professional spirit mediums. Conventionally within the religious regime of inclusive syncretism, the sharp contrast between

the personality and behavior of a spirit medium while in and out of a state of possession rhetorically served to legitimize the act of possession as truly authentic. In the wake of the social projects of modernist reform and establishment state Buddhism, however, professional spirit mediums have developed an incentive to reconceptualize the experience, practice and ethos of spirit possession so that it conforms more closely to the reconceptualized normative expectations of an orthodox Buddhism as envisioned by either or both reformist or establishment authorities. One symbolic sign of the influence of these social projects of religion making within Thai Theravada Buddhism, I argue, is this concern on the part of professional spirit mediums that their personalities and character outside (and even inside) the experience of possession reflect a more sober and virtuous disposition as properly befits an authentic vehicle of morally august *jao* and *thep*. As a result, however, some of the sharp symbolic contrasts between their personas and social presence during and outside of possession have been muted. This convergence is often more likely in the case of those more senior and/or accomplished mediums who tend to display a strong proclivity towards restrained and august public behavior during possession, instead of the more flamboyant, dramatic and transgressive behavior more commonly seen among non-professional spirit mediums or junior and novice professional spirit mediums.

Another incipient tension which is also provoked by this desire for the moral self-cultivation of character and personality in accordance with an explicitly and self-consciously Buddhist rhetoric emerges out of the existing tension within the ideology of professional spirit possession concerning the necessity and role of instruction and training. Although the idea of a teacher (*khru*) is central in many ways to the ideology and social organization of professional spirit mediumship, as I have previously explained, it is also strongly believed and asserted by members of the subculture that formal learning on the part of the medium is either unnecessary

or at best simply supplementary because the *jao* and *thep* already possess all of the knowledge and skills needed when they descend into the mundane world, possess their hosts, and proceed to provide protection, blessing, prognostication and healing. Accordingly therefore, the practices of moral self-cultivation that most professional spirit mediums are interested in tend to take the form of those mild forms of asceticism, discipline and self-control that are popular more widely amongst Thailand's educated and devout lay population and which are seen as instilling or deepening an individual's general Buddhist virtue and propriety. Thus, rarely is this moral self-cultivation envisioned by professional spirit mediums as involving either formal or informal training from others in those specific techniques or knowledges that are more commonly associated with forms of esoteric religious knowledge and technique (*wichaa*).

Despite this undercurrent of ambivalence regarding instruction within the subculture, however, the implicit sense of learning contained in the idea and practice of moral self-cultivation by professional spirit mediums does resonate with certain anthropological approaches to the social process of becoming a spirit medium – in particular, an analytic perspective which interprets socialization into a role and the enactment of an identity as involving more than simply the learning of those norms, rights, obligations, practices and repertoires of action associated with a particular role and identity. From this analytic perspective, for any role and identity to be fully and convincingly enacted and inhabited, there must also occur transformations in an individual's subjectivity and personhood, and these transformations must be perceived and accepted by both the actor in question as well as socially significant others within his or her behavioral environment. In this sense then, successfully and persuasively becoming a professional spirit medium necessarily involves abiding, and even fundamental, transformations

in an aspiring spirit medium's dispositions and habits, desires and volitions, perceptions and cognitions.<sup>189</sup>

Learning to become an accomplished Thai professional spirit medium and socialization into the various subordinate roles and identities which in combination comprise this type of religious actor, therefore, also necessarily involves, at the most general level, the cultivation within an individual of a distinctly particular style of embodied presence in, and orientation towards, the world. It involves the learning of a particular subcultural vocabulary of interpretation and action, of ends and means through which to recognize, signify and render meaningful both certain experiences of action and agency and certain modes of consciousness and sociality, all of which previously were not part of an individual's repertoire of schemas and scripts for social presence, action and intersubjectivity. Much of this learning and the knowledge resulting from it, however, are embodied and implicit in character. In addition, it is also socially embedded in contextually contingent and quite particular forms of practice and intersubjectivity which are structured through, as well as emergent from, the pragmatic necessity of repeated engagements with a specific range of significant social others – senior mediums, *jao* and *thep*, and other novice mediums initially, followed later by clients, followers, disciples and other established medium peers if an individual successfully and persuasively learns to inhabit and identify with the role, identity and status of professional mediumship.

As mediums themselves recognize, therefore, becoming a professional spirit medium does not simply involve competency in the public presentation of a particular kind of Thai religious self, much less that deceptive performance of a stigmatized Thai religious role and identity of which critics accuse them. Rather, it involves a relatively self-conscious desire for and

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<sup>189</sup> This emphasis upon the social learning of embodied dispositions, intentionalities, skills and modes of attention as a central part of the process of learning possession is explored in the work of Halloy 2012, Halloy and Naumescu 2012, Naumescu 2012, Ram 2012, and Santo 2012.



cultivation of a transformation in an individual's somatic, affective and cognitive engagement with the world such that new, meaningful and compelling moral significance is ascribed to certain specific novel forms of religious experience and agency – possession, therapeutics, mentorship, guardianship, leadership, and patronage – that were previously understood by an individual as alien, impossible or even meaningless (at least in terms of the particular subcultural vocabulary and schemas of being and practice through which they are now experienced).<sup>190</sup>

Dreams, visions and voices previously ignored or dismissed as unreal or malign are now treated as more or less occluded forms of benevolent communication. Experiences of dissociation and uncontrollable behavior that were previously interpreted as signs of illness and affliction are now reframed as indications of a religious calling and of moral virtue. Impotency and powerlessness in the face of the suffering of oneself and of others is now reinterpreted instead as a surmountable challenge rather than an overwhelming obstacle, as long of course as one is willing to rely on the supramundane assistance and guidance of possessing *jao* or *thep*. Personal subordination and dependency is now transfigured and reconceptualized in complex ways as one becomes a mentor, leader, and patron, specifically, or a figure of authority more generally, within particular social contexts and among a select range of socially significant others.

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<sup>190</sup> I assert that the desire for and cultivation of these transformations in an individual's somatic, affective and cognitive engagement with the world are "relatively self-conscious" in order to recognize that, from a medium's perspective, ultimately these changes are products of *jao* or *thep* definitively acting upon them, sometimes despite the consciously expressed wishes or preferences of a medium. The disequilibrium between a medium's desires and goals and a *jao* or *thep*'s desires and goals typically are most pronounced at the beginning of an individual's career as a professional spirit medium. Over time, the assumption and described experience of most mediums indicates that these distinct, and even conflicting, desires and goals find more common ground to share. Likewise, although accomplished mediums self-consciously seek to cultivate a more virtuous moral disposition and character, they nonetheless continue to assert that the ultimate determining force driving their transformed presence in the world – both during and outside of experiences of possession – is the agency of their possessing *jao* or *thep*. Thus, from the perspective of accomplished mediums, although they may personally desire and actively pursue cultivating within themselves a more devout and virtuous presence in the world, they often perceive their *jao* or *thep* as exerting greater control over the specific character and trajectory of these transformations than their own volitions and actions.

From an anthropological perspective, therefore, becoming a professional spirit medium is a complex and multifaceted sociocultural process. It involves more than just the socialization of an individual into a particular role and identity. It also entails the cultivation of a particular subjectivity and personality that is compatible with that role and identity as well. More precisely, however, given that the normative career trajectory of the typical professional spirit medium entails a loosely interlocking repertoire of relatively distinct roles and identities, becoming an accomplished professional spirit medium actually entails both socialization into a repertoire of contrasting roles and identities and the cultivation of a repertoire of complementary subjectivities and personalities. Moreover, an accomplished medium must also develop a capacity to articulate each of these sets of roles, identities, subjectivities and personalities with each other, such that together they comprise performatively meaningful and persuasive facets of an integrated overarching persona as a medium who is potentially all or any of these roles, identities and subjectivities to those who seek him or her out. And finally, becoming a medium also entails a medium developing a compelling and satisfying sense of how his or her overarching identity, role and subjectivity as a medium resonates meaningfully with his or her other enduring primary and secondary social roles, identities and subjectivities, such as son or daughter, brother or sister, husband or wife, parent or friend, student or businessman. In sum then, successfully becoming an accomplished professional spirit medium entails, in the end, a complex and composite process of social learning and personal cultivation, all in the service of a larger project of producing and reproducing a specific type of social and personal religious identity. Ultimately, this achievement is a long-term social process and project over which any given individual medium has only partial and uneven personal control and autonomy.

### **Criteria of Progress along the Professional Spirit Medium's Biographical Career Path**

In a certain sense, the criteria of progress along the career path of the professional spirit medium is relatively straightforward. It consists of both public and private experiences, practices and narratives which confirm that an individual has advanced successfully through the various junctures of the subculture's career path. And this advancement in turn is indicated by behavior which confirms that an individual has achieved an acceptable degree of competency and even fluency as, respectively, a vessel and mediator of supramundane virtue, an efficacious therapist, a respected teacher, a benevolent guardian, a charismatic leader, and a meritorious patron. Thus from a sociological perspective, progress along the career path consists of an individual showing himself or herself successful in meeting subcultural expectations regarding the proper public enactment of that particular subordinate role and identity, subjectivity and personality demanded by each juncture along the career path. Evidence of accomplishment along this trajectory also consists of an individual's skill in both integrating together and selectively deploying in an appropriate manner particular facets of this repertoire of roles and personas within the fluid and changing contextual demands of those daily social interactions that characterize the life of a professional spirit medium and his or her abode. In this sense then, the specific criteria or standards of progress along the career path are substantively and contextually quite diverse because they are plural in character and uniquely resonant with the substantive specificities demanded by each of those relatively distinct roles and identities, subjectivities and personas that together comprise the authentic presence of an accomplished professional medium.

Despite this changing criteria of progress depending upon what specific juncture along the career path any given individual medium is being evaluated against, one can also point to certain general types of evidence that appear and reappear within the subculture and among its

members when they seek to evaluate successful and persuasive achievements made by a professional spirit medium along any of these particular segments. Thus, for example, certain more or less public ritual events – both formal and informal in character – within the subculture mark progress along the medium’s ideal career path. This characteristic is most obvious in the case of the *rap khan* initiation ceremony which marks the formal entry into the first juncture of the career path as a pious servant of *jao* and *thep* who has acknowledged this status publicly before social others. Similarly, the rite of clients seeking an audience with a medium (*phithi khao fao*) is a formal ritual marker that a medium has progressed to the juncture of claiming to be a publicly available therapist serving others. It is during this ceremony that mediums voluntarily submit themselves to possession by their *jao* and *thep* in order to provide healing, blessing, prognostication and protection to those individuals who have sought them out for assistance of some kind.<sup>191</sup> There is no single ritual practice which formally marks a medium as a benevolent guardian to devoted followers. Rather, there are a series of events – private audiences and consultations for only followers and disciples, occasions of religious touring and pilgrimage along with followers and disciples, ceremonies of prayer, chanting and the celebration of birthdays for abode specific *jao* and *thep* – that in the aggregate consolidates a medium’s successful negotiation of this juncture along the career path. The ritual sign of effectively having taken on the role of respected teacher is marked by either private or public versions of the *khraup khru* ceremony, with the public version occurring as a segment within the annual *wai khru* ritual constituting the most iconic example of this achievement. The annual *wai khru* ceremony in its

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<sup>191</sup> This character of this ceremony ranges along a number of analytic continuums. It can be very short or very long in duration. It can be very public or very private. It can occur in accordance with a regular schedule of times and places or it can occur spontaneously whenever and wherever a client or follower seeks out a medium for assistance. Abodes (*tamnak*) open to the public typically schedule certain regular hours of the day and week when audiences can be sought, although the duration and frequency of these times is highly variable (as well as subject to adjustment as events might require).

full ritual elaboration over two days is the most iconic indicator within the subculture that a medium has become a charismatic leader not only in the eyes of his or her entourage but in the opinion of a select portion of the wider community of professional spirit mediums as well.<sup>192</sup> Ritual markers of a medium's status as a meritorious patron within the social world beyond the subculture are quite variable and diverse. Some examples are forest robe (*pha paa*) and end of lent (*kathin*) donations to Buddhist temples organized and spearheaded by mediums. Other activities that are ceremonially celebrated in public venues, however, can serve as ritual confirmation of this achievement as well. These include charitable donations, the building of public shrines and religious statuary, or even participation in the religious ceremonies of other religious communities and actors such as the Vegetarian Festival.

Implicit within the success of each of these central ritual events within the subculture is not only a medium's claim to a particular subordinate role and identity, but also the public recognition and validation of this claim by other individuals who also participate in these events. In this sense, therefore, a medium's successful claim to any of the roles and identities demanded by the subculture's career path is ultimately only persuasive when certain other individuals also simultaneously and more or less enthusiastically occupy a range of complementary roles and identities that acknowledge and validate a medium's claims. These complementary roles and identities are most typically, respectively speaking, a senior medium, a client, a follower, an apprentice, a peer, and an ally. Certain ideal typical complimentary roles and identities are associated with different junctures along the stereotypic career path. Thus, a medium's role and

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<sup>192</sup> The annual *wai khru* ceremony is a personal moral obligation for every professional spirit medium. Hence, simply carrying it out does not, in itself, indicate that a medium considers himself or herself to be a religious leader, even momentarily, within the subculture. Rather, public claims to and recognition of the status of leadership within the subculture is marked more by the style and scale of the ceremony and the degree to which it demands the mobilization and visible public instantiation of an individual medium's personal networks of alliance, support and respect within, and even beyond, the subculture.

identity as a vessel and mediator of supramundane virtue is ideally confirmed by the actions and statements of a senior professional medium. Similarly, a medium's role and identity as an efficacious therapist is most appropriately confirmed by a satisfied client, while the role and identity as a benevolent guardian is confirmed through the words and actions of devoted followers. Respected teachers have to be confirmed in their status through the laudatory statements and subordinate service of respectful apprentices, while mediums as charismatic leaders within the subculture exist only to the degree that fellow mediums and other peers display deference and support. Finally, the role and identity of a professional spirit medium as a virtuous patron beyond the subculture is most effectively confirmed by the spontaneous and unsolicited actions and statements of authoritative collegial allies who are not mediums themselves.

Other individuals active within the subculture of professional spirit mediums, however, typically do not occupy these complementary roles and identities only during those most prominent ritual events previously discussed. Consequently, evidence of a medium's progress along the subculture's career path also is revealed most crucially whenever a medium can successfully call upon other individuals to occupy these same complementary roles and identities and publicly display this same social recognition and commitment outside of central and dramatic ritual occasions such as the *phithi rap khan*, *phithi khao fao*, *phithi khraup khru*, *phithi wai khru*, and *phithi thaut pha pa*. From this perspective then, a diverse range of more or less mundane daily activities and practices performed by clients, followers and allies – such as a client requesting a medium to build or bless a new spirit shrine, a follower helping to clean and manage an abode, and an ally requesting a medium's assistance in a philanthropic project – all serve as further evidence that a medium truly has progressed along the subculture's normative

career trajectory. Progress as a professional spirit medium, therefore, is not only revealed through the regular successful production and reproduction of a range of ideologically normative and expected ritual events and performances in the life of an abode, but also through the regular successful production and reproduction in the course of everyday life of those same categories of affiliated social actors – committed and loyal senior mediums, clients, followers, apprentices, peers and allies that identify with and support the medium – who are so prominent and necessary as well during these crucial rituals in the life of the subculture.

In addition, there are a range of specific activities and developments which when engaged in by a professional spirit medium are perceived within the subculture as a clear indication of an individual's deepening personal commitment to, identification with, and even accomplishment upon the normative career path of professional mediumship. Thus for example, acquiring any of the various ritual accoutrements regularly utilized during acts of possession or key ritual events, such as the ceremonies of audience (*phithi khao fao*), is perceived as a clear marker of deepening commitment to and progress along the subculture's normative career trajectory. Religious statues and paintings of possessing *jao* and *thep* within the pantheon are an obvious example here, although more important accoutrements in the life of a medium are the colorful and extravagant ceremonial outfits that mediums frequently change into after they have induced a state of possession.<sup>193</sup> Another event that clearly marks progress along and commitment to the life of

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<sup>193</sup> This changing of attire is practically inevitable when mediums are providing audiences to clients and followers during those regularly scheduled public times for such audiences at their abode (although clients may or may not see this changing of attire depending upon the layout and convention of a given abode). Mediums also experience possession outside of those regularly scheduled times and/or outside of the abode, however, and often these occasions are not perceived as planned by the medium, reflecting instead the *jao* and *thep* demanding a presence in the world for any number of reasons. On these occasions, it is not always seen as necessary for the medium to change into one of those outfits enjoyed by that particular *jao* or *thep* in order for the experience of possession to proceed in a proper manner. Likewise, when mediums travel to the *wai khru* ceremonies of other mediums, they frequently change into the appropriate ceremonial attire of one their possessing *jao* or *thep* before they leave their abode even though they will not actually induce a state of possession until after they have arrived at the ceremony. Thus, the wearing of these outfits, strictly speaking, is neither necessary for possession to be seen as authentic nor a

professional spirit mediumship is the founding of an abode (*tamnak*) which will provide regular services to an anonymous public in need. Whether the material creation of an abode entails simply the transformation of a single room in a private house into a shrine to one's possessing *jao* and *thep* or the building of a new sanctified residence from the ground up, the opening of an abode is one of the clearest public signals within the subculture that an individual is committed to his or her role and identity as a medium. It is also an indication that one is not only a successful therapist but also very likely a successful guardian supported by an entourage of followers who can help finance and manage the running of the abode. In addition, if a medium decides to commit himself or herself so fully to serving their possessing *jao* and *thep* that he or she make mediumship his or her primary occupation, this choice is also inevitably perceived within the subculture as a sign of moral progress upon the career path. Each of these activities or developments, then, does not function as a clear indicator of movement forward into a particular juncture along the career path – after all throughout their career mediums frequently purchase new outfits and ritual accoutrements or expand, move or redesign their abode, and a medium may choose to make mediumship his or her primary occupation at any point along the career path. Rather, these developments serve as a sign of advancement along the career path in the sense of revealing an individual's deepening personal commitment to the public role and identity of professional mediumship.

Another conventional indicator of progress in the general sense of deepening competency, accomplishment and commitment (rather than progress in the sense of advancement into a further specific juncture along the normative career path) is a medium displaying refinement, restraint and composure within his or her overall style of behavior and conduct while

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fool-proof indication that a medium is in a state of possession. My observation and argument here stands in contrast to the claims of Morris (1994).



in a state of possession. A stereotypic interpretation of possession among professional spirit mediums – both inside and outside the subculture – is that an authentic possession experience is characterized by dramatic, unusual and even transgressive or violent performative excess. Very frequently, moreover, this excess is interpreted as proof of authentic supramundane spiritual prowess and efficacy. Thus, within the subculture there tends to be a general positive value placed on the display during ceremonial occasions of certain types of behavior and conduct that are so unconventional and dramatic that they are perceived as clear evidence of the authenticity of possession and the presence of transcendent alterity, of the radical eruption into conventional daily life of a radically different and transformative supramundane presence.

The most obvious examples of this sort of dramatic behavior in excess are various acts of bodily self-mortification and more or less miraculous feats of physical endurance by mediums that do not produce pain or infirmity. These feats can range from cutting a tongue until it bleeds and temporarily piercing body parts with various sharp objects to sitting on a chair of nails or walking over hot coals. Another dramatic indication of authentic possession and supramundane prowess is the speaking of a language unknown to the medium when he or she is not possessed, whether that might be a foreign language such as Malay, English or Chinese or a glossolalic form of “divine language” (*phasa thewada*) understood by those within the subculture as a generic language of conversation among *jao* and *thep* that is indecipherable to humans. Finally, devotional behavior during ritual occasions within the subculture as a whole is characterized by a more pronounced quality of emotional fervor and expression than is found in conventional devotional practices focused around the activities of Buddhist monks and temples. Whereas doctrinal and normative understandings of Thai Buddhist practice emphasizes a restrained, calming and self-disciplined form of devotional uplift, there exists in the subculture of

professional spirit mediums a proclivity towards, and positive evaluation of, dramatic and even transgressive displays of ecstasy and a lack of restraint. Hence, clients, followers and mediums frequently can erupt into loud and dramatic displays of emotional release and *phasa thewada* during consultative audiences. Similarly, interspersed during annual *wai khru* ceremonies are numerous occasions when all the mediums in attendance erupt into dramatic moments of collective ecstatic utterances or activity, including exuberant occasions of song and dance as occur sometimes, for instance, in the closing *fai bucha* (fire worship) ceremony.

Despite this stereotypic proclivity, however, there also exists a countervailing trend among many more accomplished and established mediums towards a measure of self-conscious restraint and composure in their behavioral conduct during states of possession. This disposition does not entail a strict refusal to ever engage in self-mortification, glossolalic outbursts or ecstatic displays of public emotion and activity. Rather, it is reflected in a willingness to personally engage in it less frequently, for only short periods of time when it does occur, and with less abandon and excess than is stereotypically expected. Hence, in Bangkok I observed numerous *wai khru* ceremonies in which the more senior and famous mediums in attendance declined to take part enthusiastically or even at all in the *fai bucha* ceremony. Similarly, there were many public occasions on which Sam or other mediums I knew would comment disparagingly upon the distasteful (*nakliad*) conduct of other mediums present who they perceived as behaving in a morally unbecoming manner, which usually translated into uncommonly unrestrained and exuberant behavior. And often in fact, those mediums who were most unconventional and lacking in restraint were the more novice or junior mediums within the subculture, whether in terms of seniority or literal age. Reflecting the ideological influence of a post-reform, post-establishment Buddhist religious ethos, therefore, there existed within the

subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums an undercurrent of valorization for behavioral restraint and emotional control while in a state of possession because such conduct was interpreted as more properly reflecting the moral stature of those august and virtuous *jao* and *thep* that possessed mediums and guided their actions. The most accomplished mediums, therefore, had to strike a complex performative balance during states of possession between restraint and excess, composure and abandon, because both opposing dispositions and modes of embodied subjectivity, to some degree, often were expected of them.

Another general sign of progress and accomplishment along the career path of professional spirit mediums – and ultimately just as subtle and imprecise as a tool of evaluation as the interpretation of behavioral conduct during a state of possession – was the breadth and scale of a medium's activities. In general, the more frequently a medium was possessed, provided consultative audiences to clients, performed *rap khan* and *khraup khru* initiations, engaged in philanthropic and meritorious projects, or was invited to participate in the *wai khru* ceremonies of fellow mediums, the more likely other members of the subculture were to consider him or her as successful and accomplished, as someone worthy of respect and even emulation. Similarly, in general greater respect and valorization was paid to those mediums who were possessed by a larger number and a more diverse range of *jao* and *thep*, who could provide a wider variety of forms of prognostication, blessing, protection and healing, or who were engaged in a large number of philanthropic and religious projects beyond simply *thaut pha pa* and *kathin* ceremonies. The symbolic logic underlying these assumptions presumed that increasing and ramifying social interactions and recognition within a widening field of people, institutions and supramundane beings was an implicitly and inherently valuable good that should be cultivated, sought and praised. In all of these ways, consequently, the normative ethos of the subculture

rewarded with greater prestige and respect those individuals who displayed skill and competency in meeting a demanding and even accelerating tempo, breadth and scale of interactions and exchanges, envisioned as both mundane and supramundane, as both social and cosmological in character.

Finally, one more general criteria of progress and accomplishment within the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums was the more or less self-evident mundane and concrete material and social benefits that resulted from all of a medium's various efforts to serve and bear witness to the religious and transformative virtue, potency and efficacy of his or her possessing *jao* and *thep*. The personal and social importance, and substantive diversity, of this criteria was sharply etched in my mind on one occasion when Sam had returned upcountry to the North of Thailand, partly in order to visit old medium friends and peers. In the course of catching up on the small and personal details of each other's lives because their separation, indulging in new and old gossip about mutual acquaintances and fellow mediums, and querying each other about their respective ongoing meritorious religious projects (Sam rarely missed an opportunity to seek out new financial supporters for his statue building project in Chumphon), Sam also managed to repeatedly insert into the conversation details about his recent personal history, details that clearly showed how he had risen from one success to the next since he had moved to Bangkok. Thus, he talked at some length about the size, duration and impressiveness of his last annual *wai khru* ceremony, and about the six hundred or so guests he had hosted during it. He described in some detail the new car one of his followers had donated to him for use by the abode. He explained how he had needed to bring on Pong as an assistant in his abode in order to manage all the work and obligations with which he was faced. He recounted incidents from his recent pilgrimage to India and wistfully spoke of a future trip to Nepal, pointing out how his jaunt to

India was financed by yet another follower and had actually fulfilled a prediction made to him by Jao Mae Kuan Im many years ago. He described in animated details a television show about their abode which had been broadcast several months previously and mentioned another one that was to air in just a few weeks. He mused about how famous and well-known his abode had become within the nearby neighborhoods of his corner of Bangkok. In many different ways then, Sam was presenting himself as a returning local boy who had thrived and made it good in Bangkok, and in this rhetoric of progress signs of material wealth and social prominence were presented unselfconsciously as a clear indication of his moral accomplishment, personal success and virtuous devotion.

Material indications of virtue, prosperity and success are diverse within the subculture of professional spirit mediums and they typically weave together mundane and supramundane interests and practices. Thus, they include elements such as the size of a medium's abode, the sheer scale and diversity of the altars, statues and decorations contained within the abode, and the quality and authenticity of all these items as well as the various ritual accoutrements employed during consultations and *wai khru* ceremonies or made available for purchase to visiting clients. Consequently, mediums pay considerable attention to small details of skill, craft and quality when they select or design new ceremonial outfits for their *jao* and *thep*, redesign or redecorate their abodes, shop for items to be used in ritual celebrations, and purchase or commission the creation of a new religious statue. Inferior or defective products in any of these endeavors are perceived as a demeaning and disrespectful insult to the virtue and status of the *jao* and *thep* that they serve and whose work in the mundane world is secured in part through these material objects. Mediums and followers also pay considerable attention to the quality and prestige of other material goods which are not directly envisioned as religious in nature but

which facilitate and make possible legitimate religious goals and obligations – such as cars for a medium's travel, produce and goods for the upkeep of the abode and its members, and daily offerings to *jao* and *thep*. They also pay considerable attention to the quality and economic value of items offered as donations to other mediums on ceremonial occasions, but most especially *wai khru* ceremonies. In general, the greater the quality, the larger the volume and the more expensive the cost of all of these material goods and objects, the more likely it is that a given medium and his entourage will be perceived by others in the subculture as accomplished and successful.

Social indications of virtue and success, however, are just as, if not even more, important in signaling accomplishment, progress and prestige – both moral and personal – within the Bangkok subculture of professional spirit mediums. These social indicators, moreover, are quite diverse in character. One of the most ideologically central and pragmatically unavoidable daily social indications of progress, success and virtue within the subculture is the overall character of a medium's entourage. Although size in terms of the number of participating individuals is certainly important and the most easily evaluated criteria of judgment, other more subtle characteristics such as an entourage's solidarity, durability, reliability, loyalty and devotion are also topics of discussion and evaluation within the subculture. Similarly, another conventional social indicator of virtue and success lies in the number of clients who seek out a medium as well as what types of clients patronize a medium. Typically, certain specific types of clients are seen as evidence of a medium's authenticity, prowess and success and thus are cultivated enthusiastically and diligently. Various sorts of social elites, such as politicians, wealthy businessmen, royalty, military figures, media and cultural celebrities, and foreigners, are particularly important as prestige-bestowing types of clients, but so are clients from other ethnic

groups or religious traditions because these types of clients reveal the expanding horizons of a medium's fame and appeal. An additional common social indicator of success and virtue within the subculture is the establishment and maintenance of connections with prestigious and esteemed Thai institutions or groups outside the subculture that are interested either in inviting mediums to publicly participate in the association's ongoing activities or in becoming a supporting partner in a medium's own ongoing activities and religious projects. Some of the most common examples of these institutions or groups are Buddhist temples, non-Buddhist religious organizations and ethnic or cultural associations. Finally, another potentially important social indicator of a medium's success and progress is his or her ability to receive affirmative public recognition from the Thai mass media, regardless of whether this attention comes from those limited distribution popular print publications that regularly report on popular religiosity or the more widely influential national print and electronic mass media which usually is only intermittently interested in their activities.

For professional spirit mediums, the material prosperity and social success which results from their competency as divine mediators, therapists, guardians, teachers, leaders, and patrons is ultimately perceived as not only evidence of their own personal virtue and moral accomplishment, but also – and even more importantly – as proof of the virtuous presence, miraculous blessings and supramundane efficacy of their possessing *jao* and *thep*. Material prosperity and social success is perceived as an inevitable and just reward for a properly lived virtuous life of service. This reward and recognition, however, is also a boon, if not an absolute necessity, because it makes it possible for mediums to pay proper respect to the dignity and virtue of their possessing *jao* and *thep*. In many ways, of course, this moral evaluation of material prosperity and social success within the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit

mediums is in perfect accordance with foundational Theravada Buddhist ethical attitudes towards wealth, prosperity and worldly success of all sorts: what is most important is not how much of these benefits one possesses, but rather how it is acquired and how it is used. As long as it is acquired in a morally just fashion, is not a source of attachment, and is voluntarily and even enthusiastically disposed of in the pursuit of religiously legitimate ends, then wealth, prosperity and success are interpreted conventionally as signs of Buddhist virtue rather than vice (Sizemore and Swearer 1990). As a result, it is a common if somewhat paradoxical social phenomenon in Thailand that the most virtuous and devout, even ascetic and renunciatory, religious practitioners (such as *thudong* monastic virtuosos) are typically those religious actors who acquire extraordinary amounts of wealth, success, prestige and influence (Tambiah 1984). From this perspective therefore, the historical innovation of professional spirit mediums lies in their efforts to cultivate a new category of authentic religious actor, a new vision of exemplary religious charisma, a new modality of devotional religiosity, and a new model of meaningful religious action that can successfully tap into this abiding Theravada Buddhist ideology of ethical action and personal conduct which endorses and valorizes as legitimate the confluence of moral virtue, material wealth, social success and cultural prestige in the practice of popular religiosity.

## **Conclusions**

Given these social, cultural and transactional dynamics, therefore, an anthropological interpretation and analysis of this complex and multifaceted social process through which a professional spirit medium is created demands a careful investigation of the sociocultural dynamics underlying those various processes of social learning and personal cultivation involved at each juncture along the professional medium's normative career path. As future mediums



develop increasingly committed careers as participants – first as afflicted but novice future mediums and subsequently as more or less accomplished mature mediums – in those situations and activities which are centrally defining of the subculture of professional spirit mediums, their continued successful participation hinges on their ability to achieve competency in a diverse range of widely-shared embodied forms of knowledge, practice and intersubjectivity that are broadly shared and distributed across the subculture. The segmented career biographies of professional spirit mediums ensures, however, that the most accomplished participants in the subculture, in fact, learn to become a series of relatively discrete types of participants as befits the different roles, identities and subjectivities required of each juncture along the career path. In the anthropological parlance of practice theory, accomplished professional spirit mediums have learned to relatively unselfconsciously inhabit, instantiate and extemporize upon those models and schemata which define and animate their subcultural habitus.<sup>194</sup>

This inhabitation of a subcultural habitus can be analytically disaggregated into a series of particular embodied skills, practices and forms of knowledge. Mediums need to learn new religious concepts, systems of classification and terms of reference widely shared within the subculture. They need to master special forms of ritual technique and therapy, as well as the expectations among subcultural participants regarding what constitutes an authentic and legitimate ritual performance. They need to develop reasonable fluency in those stereotypic scripts of conventional public and private interaction between mediums and a wide range of other social actors, most particularly clients, followers and other fellow mediums. They must become proficient in subcultural rhetorics of verbal and non-verbal communication. They must

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<sup>194</sup> One thinks here of Bourdieu's emphasis upon the fact that effective socialization into and performative exemplification of any habitus lies with the ability of a competent social actor to creatively and extemporaneously play with, and riff on, the interactive rules structuring any particular social field of practice in an unselfconscious manner. Bounded, but often unrecognized, creativity and innovation in practice is thus emblematic of socialization and competent agency. See Bourdieu 1977.

internalize and learn to deploy subcultural logics of social hierarchy, prestige, solidarity, and distinction. They must become adept at signifying and reproducing those dominant ideologies and narratives of religious meaning, value and legitimacy widely circulating within the subculture. They must learn to feel comfortable with the subculture's distinctive norms and ethos regarding acceptable and unacceptable goals, desired and undesired priorities, and acceptable and unacceptable methods as they apply to different types of actors and different social contexts. And they must learn to accept and exemplify – cognitively, affectively and somatically – those forms of personal commitment and identification seen as defining of an individual's authentic participation and membership within the subculture.

Becoming a professional spirit medium, therefore, entails a transformation in an individual's embodied presence and practice within his or her surrounding social world, a transformation which must be recognized, guided and even valorized by others as well if it is to succeed. Anthropologists and mediums, however, disagree ultimately as to how to characterize this transformation, what factors produce this transformation and even which other actors are crucial to the success of this transformation. Hence, what an outside anthropological analyst interprets as the learning of a composite set of social roles and identities, and the cultivation of forms of subjectivity and personhood compatible with those roles and identities, professional spirit mediums themselves interpret and understand as the unfolding of a radical transformation in their dispositions, habits and being in the world. Moreover, they experience this transformation as having been initiated and driven by the supramundane volitional presence and activity of *jao* and *thep*. What initially may seem like a relatively modest set of demands upon their interests and sense of self over time progressively deepens into a more thorough-going transformation in their personality, conduct, identity and subjectivity, as their sense of

personhood, memory and even bodily dispositions and perceptions are altered. What anthropologists might characterize as alienation, mystification and projection as the by-products of this process of social production and reproduction, professional spirit mediums, their followers, their clients and their allies, however, would characterize as sacral potency, supramundane agency and non-human volition.

**CHAPTER SEVEN**

**POSSESSION, PROFESSIONAL SPIRIT MEDIUMS AND THE ENDS OF  
MEDIUMSHIP IN LATE-TWENTIETH CENTURY POST-REFORM,  
POST-ESTABLISHMENT BUDDHIST THAILAND**

This dissertation is an ethnographically informed, anthropologically contextualized revisionist historical sociology of culture which seeks to explicate the religious role, status and authority of Bangkok professional spirit mediums in late twentieth century Buddhist Thailand. It investigates the emergence in recent Thai history of a new religious actor – the professional spirit medium – and the increasingly supra-regional subculture of mediums, followers and clients centered around these actors. This investigation is grounded in ethnographic fieldwork on the Bangkok subculture of professional spirit mediums but draws on scholarly literatures and arguments advanced about professional spirit mediums elsewhere in Thailand as well as other Thai forms of spirit mediumship and possession. Drawing in part upon older and other traditions of possession and mediumship within Thai rural and urban society, professional spirit mediums seek greater religious authority and more secure religious legitimacy within an increasingly diversified and unregulated religious landscape in late twentieth-century Thailand. The subculture is thoroughly immersed within the dominant and encompassing Theravada Buddhist milieu that largely defines the normative religious imagination of contemporary Thailand. In this regard many of its defining cosmological beliefs, ritual practices, moral values, religious goals, schemas of social performance, models of social relations, forms of material culture, aesthetic styles, and varieties of experience are fundamentally shaped by, and in many cases in broad

conformity with, the larger complex mix of ideology, ethos and praxis on display within the general Theravada Buddhist milieu of Thailand.

Nonetheless, from the normative and conventional perspective of many actors and dominant institutions within that general Buddhist milieu, the subculture of professional spirit mediums is frequently viewed with dismissal, suspicion or at best ambivalence. Thus, although professional spirit mediums are relatively common and widespread within contemporary Thailand in general and the cosmopolitan urbanized cultural space of Bangkok in particular, they are also broadly speaking marginal and stigmatized, objects of easy criticism and repudiation, and – from the perspective of mediums themselves – frequently misunderstood. For some outside the subculture they are a sign of irrationality, deception and theological confusion that should be eradicated. For some they are an example of backwards, uncivilized and primitive religiosity that should be superseded and left behind. For some they are purveyors of limited worldly benefits of a questionably Buddhist character.

I argue in this dissertation that in order to understand fully the cultural meaning and social significance of contemporary Thai professional spirit mediumship as a form of charismatic religious authority it is necessary to contextualize – historically, sociologically, and culturally – its variegated complex of beliefs, practices, roles and experiences in a much more comprehensive and detailed fashion than has previously been attempted by scholars. This approach entails rethinking not only the meaning and significance of possession in relation to Thai Theravada Buddhism but also rethinking the meaning and significance of professional spirit mediumship in relation to a larger semantic field of multiple forms of trance, possession and mediumship within Thai religiosity. In other words, understanding the meaning and significance of professional spirit mediumship in late-twentieth-century Thailand requires unpacking the

structural foundation of cultural categories, social dynamics and institutional norms that fundamentally shape the general field of Thai religiosity as well as historical developments and transformations which over time have reconfigured those foundations and that field.

Rethinking the meaning and significance of *professional* spirit mediumship is complicated by the fact that there are multiple forms or modalities of spirit possession and mediumship at play within the landscape of late-twentieth-century Thai popular religiosity. Understanding what is particular and unique about professional spirit mediumship necessitates more carefully distinguishing these various forms of possession and mediumship from each other in terms of their cosmological justifications, ritual techniques, styles of trance, modes of social organization, and cultural prestige, to name just a few salient variables. Identifying and analytically deciphering the protean semantic and social field of trance, possession and mediumship as a domain characterized by irreducible plurality, conflict and even contradiction facilitates a more precise understanding of the cultural meanings and social reality of professional spirit mediumship in contemporary Thailand. Out of this careful comparative analysis emerges a more nuanced appreciation for the unique cultural characteristics, social dynamics and processual logics that structure everyday life in the subculture.

Rethinking the meaning and significance of possession as a general socio-cultural phenomenon in relation to Thai Theravada Buddhism is complicated by the fact that, as I argue, there are multiple historical formations of Thai Theravada Buddhism at play in late twentieth-century Thailand, each offering their own particular ideological, cultural and social interpretation of the meaning and significance of the idea and practice of possession. These historical formations take their orientation from distinct regimes of Buddhist value and distinct ways of envisioning Buddhism as a religious tradition, and these regimes are instantiated through

particular social projects of constituting Buddhism as an epistemological and ideological form which is instantiated in particular configurations of sociality, praxis and subjectivity. Identifying these distinct religious regimes of value and religion making, and their historically shifting influence and dominance over the general field of Thai religiosity, produces a more nuanced explanation of the emergence, character and trajectory of professional spirit mediumship. In a manner similar to my revisionist understanding of trance, possession and spirit mediumship, I argue that understanding the meaning and significance of professional spirit mediumship, requires a rethinking of the nature of Thai Theravada Buddhism and its historically constituted character as a protean semantic field and social formation also characterized by irreducible plurality, conflict and contradiction.

A series of general economic, political and social transformations in the post World War II era have transformed the social and institutional environment within which Thai religiosity has developed. Expanding industrial capitalist development, deepening political democratization and intensifying urbanization have altered the religious needs and expectations of a growing segment of the population as well as the ability of existing Buddhist groups and institutions to satisfy those needs and expectations. A general consequence of these developments has been the growth in novel religious movements and groups, increasingly unbounded and unregulated charismatic forms of religious authority, and an efflorescence of diverse and innovative models of religious personhood, devotional expression, esoteric mastery, and sacralizing technique. Bangkok professional spirit mediums constitute one of these types of novel, emergent religiosity and display cultural and social features shared by others.

In the wake of the declining reach and power of modernist and establishment visions of Buddhist religiosity, the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums has emerged to

advance a novel vision of the properly lived Buddhist life. Grounded in an ideology of devotional service to moral virtuous lords and deities, mediums envision themselves as benevolent vessels of supramundane entities seeking to protect, preserve and propagate conventional Buddhist values, morals and institutions even as those weaken and decline in the broader society. That possession and ecstatic behavior could be reframed as properly devotional and devout Buddhist practice and experience is a historically unusual claim. However, this social and ideological project of upgrading the meaning and value of conventionally marginalized or disparaged forms of religious experience and practice in a Buddhist idiom is a more general historical dynamic evident across the field of Thai popular religiosity. In fact, many of the ideological, cultural, and social characteristics and dynamics that characterize the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums as a collective social phenomenon are shared, to varying degrees, with other innovative movements and projects in the post-reform, post-establishment era of Thai Buddhism.

Nonetheless, the intimate, daily religious life of mediums and those associated with them in the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums is shaped by subculture specific social and cultural dynamics. Examining the subculture itself as a religious field of social struggles over symbolic capital between a variety of social actors, one can discern a temporal and social arc of challenge and achievement as distilled through the normative career trajectory of the ‘typical’ professional spirit medium. The religiously valued lives of accomplished mediums and those participants in the subculture who circle around them are collaboratively bound together as a sequential series of paired roles and identities. Through a shared project of creating various refracted dimensions of a particular modality of Buddhist charismatic religious authority, and the beneficial consequences flowing from it, mediums, disciples, followers, clients and even



religious authorities beyond the subculture all play a part in the production of the morally virtuous life, calling and vocation of the professional spirit medium as both an individual and a collective reality.

In the end, I argue that surveying this highly differentiated and pluralistic landscape of Thai Buddhist religiosity reveals a sociocultural environment in which multiple forms of Buddhism and multiple forms of spirit possession and mediumship are in conversation with multiple forms of Buddhist inspired devotional and esoteric popular religiosity. The full religious meaning and significance of contemporary Thai professional spirit mediumship as a social reality and a cultural category is only truly discernible once this composite total field of similarities and differences, agreement and disagreement, conflict and collaboration, and support and subversion has been charted and analyzed. Only then is it possible to delve more specifically into those particular rhetorics and idioms of charismatic authenticity and authority and those particular schemas of strategic action and performance that are taken for granted within the subculture of professional mediumship and which constitute, in part, the particular distinctiveness of this religious subculture as a form of daily lived experience. However, the substantive documentation and analytic explication of the cumulative dialectics of possession, ritual and sociality during the various stages of the normative career path of the professional spirit medium, and the manner by which these dialectics constitute the dynamic, emergent foundation for the collaborative production of charisma as a religious experience within the subculture, is largely deferred as an ethnographic exercise in this dissertation.

## **The Ends of Mediumship within the Subculture of Bangkok Professional Spirit Mediums**

### **(I) – Renunciatory Transgressions**

Arriving early in the evening at an abode in Chonburi, an adjacent province to Bangkok on its eastern border, the host – a medium of Jao Mae Umathewi – is standing out front welcoming guests who are arriving for her annual *wai khru*. After the most perfunctory of greetings between her the mediums and their entourages with whom I have travelled here, we proceed up and through her residence in order to reach the open backyard courtyard where the ritual preparations for the ceremony have been set up. The ground floor of her large, extravagant three story abode is filled with elegant pictures of the medium, numerous statues of the Buddha as well as Hindu gods such as Siva, Ganesh, and Umathewi. It even sports two doubled sets of statues of Jesus and Mary.<sup>195</sup> What causes me to pause, however, are the two monks I see holding court of a sort inside the spacious main entranceway of the abode.

One elderly, dark skinned monk is seated on a wooden chair with perhaps ten people, mostly women, seated on the floor in front of him, leaning in close to listen and observe. One woman, eyes closed and arms swaying gracefully around her, is clearly in a state of possession. The monk is puffing on a large cigar and vaguely, as if from a psychic distance, watching the women, occasionally stopping to bark out inarticulate sounds at her. Leaning forward eventually he exhales and blows over her head in a stereotypic ritual act of auspicious blessing (*pao mon*) frequently observed among mediums. On a wooden bench on the other side of the room a younger monk sits with his legs tucked up him, and he is surrounded as well by a few lay observers. He is speaking fast and in a high pitched, falsetto voice, offering up advice and prognostications of the future. Occasionally he slips briefly into that rhythmic staccato sound of glossolalia and inspired speech associated with the language of the gods (*phasa thewada*). When our entourage exits the abode several hours later both monks are still seated in the entranceway,

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<sup>195</sup> On the drive back to Bangkok later that night I am told by one of the mediums from Bangkok that our host that night was a Christian, even though she is also a spirit medium for Umathewi and other Hindu gods.

still surrounded by a now different cluster of interested parties and clients, still in a state of possession and still offering blessings and speaking in tongues, respectively.

The notion that monks can be possessed by *jao* or *thep* is typically denied within the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums. Thus, I was repeatedly told that it was impossible for monks to become possessed. It was explained to me that possession would “violate the teachings of the Buddha” (*phit kham saun phra phutajao*) and that because “the moral discipline of monks is greater than even virtuous divinities” (*sin khong phra sung kwa ong thep*) it simply was not possible. Moreover, *thep* do not bother (*mai yung*) monks but instead respect and honor them. Given that most relations of divine service between humans and *jao* or *thep* are initiated by the divinity causing illness and misfortune for the human host, such affliction was something that presumably no truly virtuous *jao* or *thep* would, or could, perform. When Sam was a monk during the rains retreat he, his apprentice medium, and all of the members of his entourage denied that he could become possessed while he was wearing the robes of a renunciant, even if he or any of his possessing divinities desired it. When I specifically asked them at that time about the monks in a state of possession we all observed several years previously in Chonburi, I was told, after a brief and awkward silence, that such behavior was a violation of the monastic code of discipline. Monks who allowed themselves to become possessed like that were not good monks and clearly could not control their consciousness and agency as they should be able to.

Although I never personally saw other monks in an actual state of possession, one heard mention of such monks occasionally during the backstage talk among clients and followers at ritual events within the subculture. Moreover, there are references to monks becoming possessed scattered here and there in the margins of the scholarly literature. Often they are stories about

novices who have become possessed by virtuous supramundane entities. Pearce, for example, briefly recounts a story told to him by a Brahmin about an abbot who after passing away returned to possess a novice at his monastery. The novice was queried because he went into trance and spoke and acted like the deceased abbot, who it turned out was not happy with his memorial shrine and was seeking alterations (Pearce 2011: 366). Similarly, in the biography of Luang Ta Chi there is a story about how one of his young novices in 1954 became possessed by Maitreya after excelling at concentration meditation. Upon entering states of deep and sustained absorption, the twelve year old novice who typically stuttered gave long, erudite sermons and answered questions employing technical terminology he was normally unaware of. Upon exiting these states of meditative prowess, however, the novice could remember nothing. Even skeptical Thammayut monks were convinced of the reality of this possession, it was claimed (Kamala 2005: 51-57).

In addition, the scholarly literature contains references – again, typically unelaborated and in the margins – of monks who undergo experiences like possession, although they frequently deny such attribution. Thus, as I recounted in Chapter 5, Pattana discusses a famous monk of some repute and prowess who explains that he is possessed by a “Dhammic entity” (*ong tham*), also referred to as the spirits of Buddhist saints who lived at the time of the Buddha, when in a state of trance which empowers him with sacral efficacy and enables him to speak in tongues (in this case, called “Dhammic language” or *phasa tham*) (Pattana 2012: 40-41). Likewise, Maud tells of a monk prominent in the creation of the modern mythologies of Luang Phau Thuat who received numerous visions and revelatory inspirations from Luang Phau Thuat through which he became a primary and privileged conduit of his enduring presence, enabling him to retrace Luang Pho Thuat’s exact travels and rediscover miraculous evidence of his spiritual prowess.

The monk, however, explicitly denied that he was ever possessed by Luang Phau Thuat (Maud 2007: 201).

Interestingly, in my discussion with a deputy rector at Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University in Bangkok, I was told that there are no formal Vinaya disciplinary rules or rules established by the National Thai Sangha which prohibit a monk from becoming possessed or treat it as a disciplinary infraction, despite what many in the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums believed. Neither had this rector ever seen any directives, proclamations or advisories from the Sangha administration about the matter or advising against it. He did agree, however, that it violated traditional Thai norms and expectations. He himself had never seen a monk with a proclivity towards possession (*mi ong*), but he had heard of them. He explained the phenomenon of monks who become possessed as a result of poorly trained or educated monks who foolishly stray into such nonsense or as a consequence of individuals who were mediums prior to ordination and thus cannot break off their spiritual and ritual obligations and indebtedness.

Regardless of whether monks becoming possessed by *thep* violates either monastic rules or traditional custom, the very idea does seem to violate an implicit cultural logic about possession within the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums. Although never explicitly stated as such to me, normative statements about who could and could not become possessed seemed to work according the logic that virtuous and divine supramundane entities seen as endowed with *ong* could not displace the agency and volitional control of human entities also endowed with *ong* – which means principally monarchs and monks. Rather, they were only able to possess normal but virtuous humans. Given this general normative classificatory logic, it made sense that I was repeatedly told that monks could not become possessed, even though there

was occasional and random empirical evidence that monks becoming possessed was an ongoing empirical reality within the social worlds that Bangkok professional spirit mediums circulated within. The limited number of exceptions to this rule of classificatory logic never compelled a revision to general presumptions and models, however. Rather, explanation about exceptions to the general rule and principles were offered up on an ad hoc basis when actual empirical cases were encountered or raised as a concern.

Furthermore, both the moral-cum-classificatory distinction between medium and monks and the concomitant necessary religious asymmetry and hierarchical ranking between them was foundational to the definition of the professional medium's self-proclaimed vocation as a virtuous yet autonomous and complementary Buddhist calling alongside that of monastic renunciants. Many of the ritual practices, moral self-understandings and social relations of indebtedness practiced and cultivated by Bangkok professional spirit mediums relied upon, even required, a distinction between monks and mediums. If monks were to regularly become possessed by *thep* or if a statistically large number of mediums were to be monks, then in a subtle fashion much of the centrally defining cultural logic of moral and symbolic transactions and identifications that fueled ongoing social relations within the Bangkok subculture of professional spirit mediums would become contradictory and unwind. In a certain hypothetical sense then, if monks were to easily and regularly become spirit mediums the organizing logic and gestalt of the subculture would either dissolve or have to reconstitute itself according to a radically different set of principles with regards to foundational ideas about psychic integrity and volitional control, moral virtue and somatic propriety, and hedonistic desires and ascetic renunciation. Monks regularly and in large numbers becoming virtuous vessels of *jao* and *thep*, therefore constitutes an implicit destabilizing limit to the conventional cultural and social logic

of the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums, and its instantiation as a social reality rather than an imaginary possibility could in all likelihood produce the end of the subculture of professional mediumship as it is currently configured.

## **The Ends of Mediumship within the Subculture of Bangkok Professional Spirit Mediums**

### **(II) – Incarnational Dreams**

When I returned to the field in the summer of 1998 I discovered that Sam had self-published a modest manifesto of sorts. It was a bound photocopy volume titled “Belief in the Bodhisattva Way” that contained a brief and selective personal history, a list of rules that followers and disciples of Jao Mae Kuan Im should observe, instructions in how to worship or make vows to not only Jao Mae Kuan Im but Siva and Umathewi as well, transliterations of a series of prayers, spells and chants from Chinese, a Thai language invocation of communal unity to be chanted, and a poem about living a propitious life. The slim volume in essence provided to those interested an official biography of Sam and his virtuous calling, a narrative of some detail about that calling as demanded of him by Jao Mae Kuan Im, and a manual of practice for those dedicated to observing a virtuous life at the abode.

Inside the manifesto-cum-ritual manual while he is explaining how Jao Mae Kuan Im entered his life, Sam makes a rather unusual and unusually direct statement. “Divine Mother has told me that I am not a spirit medium.” In order to rhetorically drive this point home, in fact, a series of three different Thai words commonly translated in English as “spirit medium” are listed in sequence: *rang song*, *ma song*, and *khon song jao*. Sam goes on to explain that: “Rather, I am a part of the divine one (*pen suan nueng haeng phra ong than*) that descends when it comes time for me to carry out her duties according to her commands from above.” The language of identity

and descent is ambiguous but conforms with certain off-hand comments that Sam had at times made claiming that he was an unusual sort of spirit medium, that there was an enduring, lingering virtuous presence of Jao Mae Kuan Im, or other divinities, that lingered in and around him even when he was not formally possessed in the conventional sense.

When I eventually asked Chotima, one of the abodes most important and long term assistants, about this passage in the publication, she paused and answered my question much more seriously than other enquiries I had often made, pausing multiple times during the explanation to ask “do you understand?” She explained that Sam was sent down from above to do the work of Jao Mae, and was not like ordinary humans. A normal medium when possessed cannot remember what happens during the possession and once the possession is over. Moreover, all of the medium’s special abilities, powers and insights leave along with the *jao* as well. But “Sam displays these special insights even when not possessed.” If you visited the abode with a friend, she continued, he could sit there and tell you if you or your friend is invested with an *ong* even without being possessed. “So it is like a part of Phra Mae Kuan Im is residing permanently within him,” she noted. It is not that he is not a normal human anymore, she clarified, because he still is. But “he has this part of Jao Mae as well, so that he is more than typically human.” Consequently, “Sam is not like other mediums in general.”

Claims of permanent incarnational divine presence were not unheard of within the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums, although they were not exactly widespread either. They tended to be made in passing, were made more frequently to disciples and followers than anonymous clients and the general public, and seemed to be suggested by followers and disciples more than mediums themselves. In their infrequency, obliqueness, and assertion by close associates of mediums, they seemed to resemble as rhetorical acts the sorts of claims that



certain charismatic and virtuoso monks are accomplished saints (*arahants*) which are also typically made by close and devout associates rather than the monks themselves. Thus, for example, when first visiting the abode of another professional medium who was an associate and familiar peer of Sam and his abode, a follower who was explaining to me how that abode differed from others explained that “this medium is different. The *jao* has a permanent presence within her, and is not just temporary. It is not only present when it is invited down.” The follower went on to explain though that “the medium is still human and does not flaunt her status as a specially empowered medium.”

Why would a medium (or his or her followers), who is considered successful and established by all conventional standards within the subculture, distance himself or herself from the status and identity of mediumship, even going so far as to obliquely repudiate such a status? Why would they feel the desire to fundamentally refashion their religious role, identity and legitimacy into something else, an action that is reminiscent in many ways of other religious actors – like monks and esoteric masters (*mau*) – who while displaying behavior similar to possession deny that actually they are being possessed? One explanation for such statements resides in the unavoidably disparaged and stigmatizes status of spirit mediums as religious actors. As a type of religious experience, spirit possession is conventionally disparaged and dismissed by those outside the subculture. As a type of religious actor, spirit mediums conventionally have low status and limited religious authority in the eyes of most Thai Buddhists. And as a type of religious calling, spirit mediumship is conventionally considered rather inferior and questionable by those outside the subculture. All of these negative general opinions resonate with varying consequences inside the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums, despite the efforts by mediums, disciples, followers and even clients to refute

these stigmatizing and disparaging claims and associations. The repeated unavoidability of these general cultural presumptions means that members of the subculture can display ambivalence about the realities of spirit possession even as they seek to craft alternative explanations and interpretations that reconstitute possession and mediumship into a prestigious, virtuous and thoroughly Buddhist vocation and calling.

In addition, it is noteworthy that claims about incarnational presence are frequently made in the context of comparisons with other professional spirit mediums or lead to such statements. From this perspective, claiming that divinity has a permanent presence within a medium is yet one more strategy for not only claiming uniqueness vis-à-vis other mediums who are implicitly competitive peers within the subculture but ritual and supramundane superiority as well. Such claims also reframe and refashion conventional subcultural assertions of authenticity, authority and legitimacy vis-à-vis other sorts of religious actors and virtuosos beyond the subculture, such as monks, astrologers, Brahmins, fortune tellers and a whole range of other religious actors who provide a roughly similar set of religious services to a roughly similar set of religious needs. Hinting at incarnational presence from this perspective is a strategy of branding superiority.

Moreover, claims about permanent incarnational presence resolve a persistent anxiety amongst mediums, and within the subculture more generally, about the instability and volatility of authority, wisdom and efficacy ascribed to and flowing from spirit mediums. By definition, the supramundane presence, efficacy and extraordinary insights of possessing *jao* and *thep* are intermittent and ambiguous affairs. They not only come and go with the descent of *jao* and *thep*, but they also typically require acts of interpretation and translation by humans in order to render them discernible and transparent. In a manner strikingly different from monks, Brahmins and other religious virtuosos in Buddhist Thailand, the unquestionable religious authority of

(professional) spirit mediums is a perpetually temporary and tenuous affair. As a result, the general religious and social authority of professional spirit mediums is haunted by its revocable, punctuated, and occluded character. In the daily life of abodes and professional spirit mediums outside those times when rituals of possession are occurring, one can sense among mediums, followers and clients an undercurrent of uncertainty, tension and ambiguity regarding just how authoritative are the claims made by mediums when they are not possessed. How definitively should they be treated? How compelling are they and what degree of obligation, indebtedness and commitment should they engender? The social authority of professional spirit mediums needs to be exercised beyond and outside of moments of possession if entourages are to succeed as ongoing collective enterprises, but what are the secure foundations of that extended and distributed authority if, due to practical constraints, every claim, request, or command cannot be directly linked to the explicit or revelatory wishes of a *jao* or *thep*? The idea of a permanent incarnational presence that is always in principle communicatively accessible neatly solves that problem.

Of course, the notion of a permanent incarnational presence also creates other problems in the process. The revocable, punctuated and occluded nature of the *jao* and *thep*'s presence in the world by means of possession is, in the cultural and social logics of the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums, central to the performative reality of their supramundane presence and authenticity. The sharp and dramatic distinction between how a particular, fallible, and very limited human acts and how a mythic, perfected and expansively omnipotent divinity acts is crucial to the persuasive and compelling authority of any particular medium. Pronounced ruptures in voice, behavior and comportment is the very sign that an extraordinary, unusual and rare supramundane intentionality and agency is compelling and persuasively present. If that

presence, however, was to perpetually advance into and retreat from intersubjective and interactive reality in a subtle, unexpected and even imperceptible fashion only irregularly cued by markers of verbal, behavioral, and sartorial distinction, it is not fully clear how the charismatic authority of mediums could be reliably secured as an intersubjective, performative accomplishment. A new symbolic, somatic and phenomenological logic of performatively marking the presence of supramundane intentionality and agency would need to be constituted by those within the subculture, therefore, if enduring incarnational presence was to become a widespread claim and reality within the subculture.

Moreover, the revocable, punctuated and occluded nature of the *jao* and *thep*'s presence provides the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit medium, and mediums in particular, certain often unrealized benefits. It can explain the fallibility of prognostications, advice, blessings and services offered by mediums. It justifies the personal and social limitations, even failures, of mediums to fully and continually live up to the exceedingly demanding principles of a perfected moral life of sacrifice, compassion, generosity and service held up as normative within the subculture. It validates the all too human weaknesses, hedonistic desires and self-regard that professional spirit mediums can display while simultaneously securing claims to occasional episodes of extraordinary achievement, restraint and self-sacrifice. Although the inevitable vagaries of a not always virtuously lived life could be plausibly accounted for in a world and religious calling of permanent incarnational presence, it would be more complicated and challenging.

Of course, by implication a widespread ideology of incarnation supported by a fully elaborated milieu of social and cultural practices that supported this ideology would, not surprisingly, constitute another formal end to the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit

mediums just as surely as would the widespread reality of monks acting as spirit mediums. It is not clear, in fact, to what degree a subculture filled with human vessels who are permanently infused with the divine presence of the gods could still be called a subculture of spirit mediums. When the very language for labeling (professional) spirit mediums foundationally denotes the act of entering and the idea of being a ridden host, one suspects that a new nomenclature itself would have to emerge to distinguish these incarnates from conventional spirit mediums.

Monks who become mediums and mediums who become incarnates are both, from one perspective “deviations” from the general conventional cultural and social logics that structure the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums. At the same time, from another perspective they are logical – if still relatively rare – extrapolations from ideological and praxological innovations that have emerged from within the subculture. In this sense, they are almost predictable deviations once it becomes plausible to imagine that morally virtuous and august divinities now possess humans and the practice of spirit possession is a full-time vocation and a Buddhist-inspired religious calling. Each of these innovations constitutes new horizons of religious possibility and imagination not previously conceivable within the models of other modalities of trance, possession and spirit mediumship in twentieth-century Buddhist Thailand.

Each of these “deviations” moreover point to certain formal and discursive limits on the general field of professional spirit mediumship as a modality of popular religiosity within contemporary Buddhist Thailand as well. If one takes seriously the claims by many religious actors – both inside and outside the subculture – that their experiences of, for lack of a better term, trance and ecstasy are authentic and valuable but not cases of possession, then one can begin to conceptualize professional spirit mediumship as analytically at least residing within a larger subset of unconventional, largely formally unrecognized religious experiences beyond the

conventional frameworks of inclusive syncretic Buddhism, modernist reform Buddhism and establishment state Buddhism. Scattered across reporting in the Thai-language mass media one sees relatively regular accounts of otherwise unconventional religious practices, teachings, and virtuosos centered on visionary and/or ecstatic experience. Religious teachers (*ajan*) of various sorts claim to have a sixth sense (*yan*) that enables them to pierce the veil of conventional reality and see the workings of karma, fate and observe, communicate or manage relations with various sorts of supramundane entities, troubling or beneficial (for example, Moodcharoen 2013). Diverse vaguely parapsychologies and teachings about divine energies promulgated by Japanese and other new religious movements circulate within urbanized and bourgeois religious practitioners seeking somatically rewarding and phenomenologically dramatic experiences of the virtuously extraordinary. Accomplished practitioners of both mainstream and alternative Buddhist meditation practices, including well established and respected saints, recount tales of how during deep states of meditative equipoise they encounter and converse with *phi*, *thep* and former monastic virtuosos or arahants.

Few of these types of religious actors, practices or experiences show up in the conventional scholarly accounts of Buddhism or religiosity in contemporary Thailand, whether written by foreign or Thai academics. Yet these visionary and broadly ecstatic religious experiences, and their ritual technologies, are more common than is typically presumed in conventional models and representations of Thai Buddhism, and there seems to be a general craving and desire for them among a diverse spectrum of the Thai public. From this perspective then, professional spirit mediums and their subculture constitutes one dimension of a larger and diversely differentiated field and economy of visionary and ecstatic ideologies, practices, actors and technologies. Some of the elements of belief, practice and sociality found within the

subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums overlap with these other modalities of visionary experience and ecstatic practice, but others do not. Different configurations of the semantic elements that constitute the field of visionary ecstatic practice are possible and exist as empirical realities, and professional spirit mediumship and its subculture constitutes just one logical articulation of these combinatory classificatory possibilities. Monks “possessed” by arahants or Dhammic essences, esoteric masters “possessed” by mythic founding lineage instructors, *ajans* infused with revelatory insights into the workings of karma, and laypersons conversing during meditation retreats with *thep* and arahants are other possibilities that are difficult to recognize and even discern, in part because academic scholars of Thai Buddhism – and Theravada Buddhism in general – have rarely considered visionary and ecstatic experience to be an authentic, commonplace or highly valued religious phenomenon within the Theravada Buddhist religious imagination. However, the visionary and the ecstatic remains a terra incognita to scholars and a silence within official representations of Thai Buddhism, despite its familiarity, meaning and salience to a wide assortment of contemporary Thai Buddhists pursuing a diverse range of religious experiences, paths and vocations beyond what is conventionally marked as normative, typical or acceptable.

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## GLOSSARY

Transliteration	Thai word	English translation
<i>Aphinihan</i>	อภินิหาร	Power of barami; meritorious, magisterial authority
<i>Athithan</i>	อธิษฐาน	Prayers
<i>Barami</i>	บารมี	Perfected virtuous charisma
<i>Bai sri</i>	บายศรี	Cone-shaped ritual offering representing Mt. Meru
<i>Bun</i>	บุญ	Buddhist merit; benefit of virtuous action
<i>Bun barami</i>	บุญบารมี	Charismatic merit & virtue;
<i>Bunyarit</i>	บุญฤทธิ์	Supramundane efficacy of power of merit
<i>Chata</i>	ชะตา	Fate
<i>Chok</i>	โชค	Luck
<i>Hai phon</i>	ให้พร	Bestowing blessings
<i>Horasat</i>	โหราศาสตร์	Astrology and fortune telling
<i>Itthirit</i>	อิทธิฤทธิ์	Miraculous power of enlightened minds
<i>Jai aun</i>	ใจอ่อน	‘Weak-hearted’
<i>Jai khaeng</i>	ใจแข็ง	‘Strong-hearted’
<i>Jao</i>	เจ้า	Lord; spirit; deity
<i>Jao Mae</i>	เจ้าแม่	“Lord mother”
<i>Jao Noi</i>	เจ้าน้อย	Little lord
<i>Jao Phau</i>	เจ้าพ่อ	“Lord father”
<i>Jao Puu</i>	เจ้าปู่	Lord grandfather
<i>Jao thi san</i>	เจ้าที่ศาล	Shrine lord
<i>Kae bon</i>	แก้บน	Ritual giving of thanks for vows fulfilled



<i>Kathin</i>	กฐิน	End of Lenten season robe donation
<i>Khao fao</i>	เข้าเฝ้า	To seek an audience or consultation
<i>Khao phi song phi</i>	เข้าผีทรงผี	To possess
<i>Khatha</i>	คาถา	Incantation; spell
<i>Khon nab thue</i>	คนนับถือ	Believer (in a religious faith)
<i>Khon song</i>	คนทรง	Spirit medium
<i>Khon song jao</i>	คนทรงเจ้า	Spirit medium
<i>Khrau</i>	เคราะห์	Fate; fortune
<i>Khraup khru</i>	ครอบครู	“To cover or transmit the teacher”
<i>Khru</i>	ครู	Teacher; empowered master
<i>Khwan</i>	ขวัญ	Vital essence
<i>Luk kha</i>	ลูกคำ	Clients
<i>Luk lan</i>	ลูกหลาน	Followers; “descendants and offspring”
<i>Luk liang</i>	ลูกเลี้ยง	Followers; “adopted child,” “step-child”
<i>Luksit</i>	ลูกศิษย์	Disciple; student
<i>Mau</i>	หมอ	Master; expert (in esoteric arts)
<i>Mau du</i>	หมอดู	Fortune teller; palm reader
<i>Mau su khwan</i>	หมอสู่วัณ	Master of vital essences
<i>Mi ong</i>	มีองค์	Propensity for or susceptibility to possession
<i>Nam mon</i>	น้ำมนต์	Sacralized water
<i>Ong</i>	องค์	“mana-filled object”; supramundane entity
<i>Pathihan</i>	ปาฏิหาริย์	Miracle; magic
<i>Paungkan</i>	ป้องกัน	Protection

<i>Phasa thep / thewada</i>	ภาษาเทพ / เทวดา	Language of the gods
<i>Phayakon</i>	พยากรณ์	Prognostication
<i>Phi</i>	ผี	Spirits; capricious, unpredictable or malicious spirits
<i>Phithi</i>	พิธี	Ceremony; ritual
<i>Phithi bucha fai</i>	พิธีบูชาไฟ	Fire worship ceremony
<i>Phithi khraup khru</i>	พิธีครอบครู	Transmitting master's potency ceremony
<i>Phithi rap khan</i>	พิธีรับขัน	Initiation ceremony; ceremony of receiving the tray
<i>Phithi wai khru</i>	พิธีไหว้ครู	Annual paying respect to the teacher ceremony
<i>Phra</i>	พระ	Buddhist monk
<i>Phu borijak</i>	ผู้บริจาค	Benefactor; financial supporter
<i>Phu chuai luea</i>	ผู้ช่วยเหลือ	Assistant
<i>Raksa rok</i>	รักษาโรค	Healing illness
<i>Rang song</i>	ร่างทรง	Spirit medium
<i>Rap khan</i>	รับขัน	“Receiving the tray”
<i>Ruesi</i>	ฤๅษี	Hermit; ‘old father’; mythic master of esoteric lineage
<i>Sadau khrau</i>	สะเดาะเคราะห์	Avert ill fate
<i>Saksit</i>	ศักดิ์สิทธิ์	Sacred; supramundane potency
<i>San</i>	ศาล	Public shrine
<i>Saiyasat</i>	ไสยศาสตร์	Magic; occult science
<i>Sasana</i>	ศาสนา	Religion
<i>Song jao khao phi</i>	ทรงเจ้าเข้าผี	Spirit possession; “inhabited by a lord, entered by a spirit”
<i>Song jao khao thep</i>	ทรงเจ้าเข้าเทพ	Spirit possession; “inhabited by a lord, entered by a deity”

<i>Suat mon</i>	สวดมนตร์	Devotional chanting
<i>Suep chata</i>	สืบชะตา	Extending fate or destiny
<i>Su khwan</i>	สู่ขวัญ	Blessing for long life and strengthening vitality
<i>Tamnak</i>	ตำหนัก	Abode of royalty; household shrine of professional spirit medium
<i>Tham bun</i>	ทำบุญ	Make merit
<i>Tham nai</i>	ทำนาย	Make predictions
<i>Thaut pha pa</i>	ทอดผ้าป่า	Forest robe donation
<i>Thep</i>	เทพ	Divinity; god
<i>Thewada</i>	เทวดา	Divinity; god
<i>Thi phueng</i>	ที่พึ่ง	Source of support and refuge
<i>Wai</i>	ไหว้	Raising hands, palms touching, in respect
<i>Wai khru</i>	ไหว้ครู	‘Paying respect to the teacher’
<i>Wat</i>	วัด	Buddhist temple
<i>Wian thian</i>	เวียนเทียน	To walk, carry or pass lighted candles around an object
<i>Wicha</i>	วิชา	(Esoteric) knowledge
<i>Yan</i>	ยันต์	Sacred geometric and figurative design